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WAR**

# BARBAROSSA



**THE INVASION  
THAT CHANGED  
THE COURSE  
OF WWII**

**UNCOVER THE  
NAZIS' BRUTAL  
PLANS FOR  
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EXPLORE THE KEY BATTLES IN A  
STRUGGLE THAT KILLED MILLIONS



**A WAR OF ANNIHILATION**  
INSIDE THE EARLY ENCIRCLEMENTS  
THAT STUNNED THE SOVIET UNION



**DEFEND THE MOTHERLAND**  
HOW THE RED ARMY DESTROYED THE  
MYTH OF AN INVINCIBLE WEHRMACHT







# **“WE ONLY HAVE TO KICK IN THE DOOR AND THE WHOLE ROTTEN STRUCTURE WILL COME CRASHING DOWN”**

So asserted a triumphant Hitler when describing the state of the nation he loathed the most: the Soviet Union. In his warped world view the land ruled by Stalin was the birthplace of Judeo-Bolshevism, a sinister Jewish plot to undermine the very laws of nature and the rights of supposedly superior races to seize territory and resources as they saw fit. To that end it had to be destroyed, its people enslaved and murdered and its territories occupied by German settlers. Only then would the Third Reich's future be secured. His plans for the East were as ambitious as they were brutal, and on 22 June 1941 he finally got to put them to the test by unleashing the largest invasion force in history. This is the story of how 3.8 million Axis soldiers poured into the Soviet Union and initiated an existential struggle that would claim the lives of over 40 million people and see one nation brought to its knees.









# OPERATION BARBAROSSA

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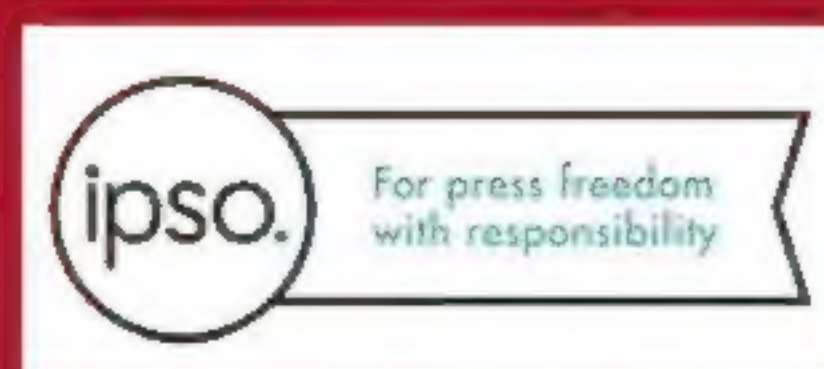
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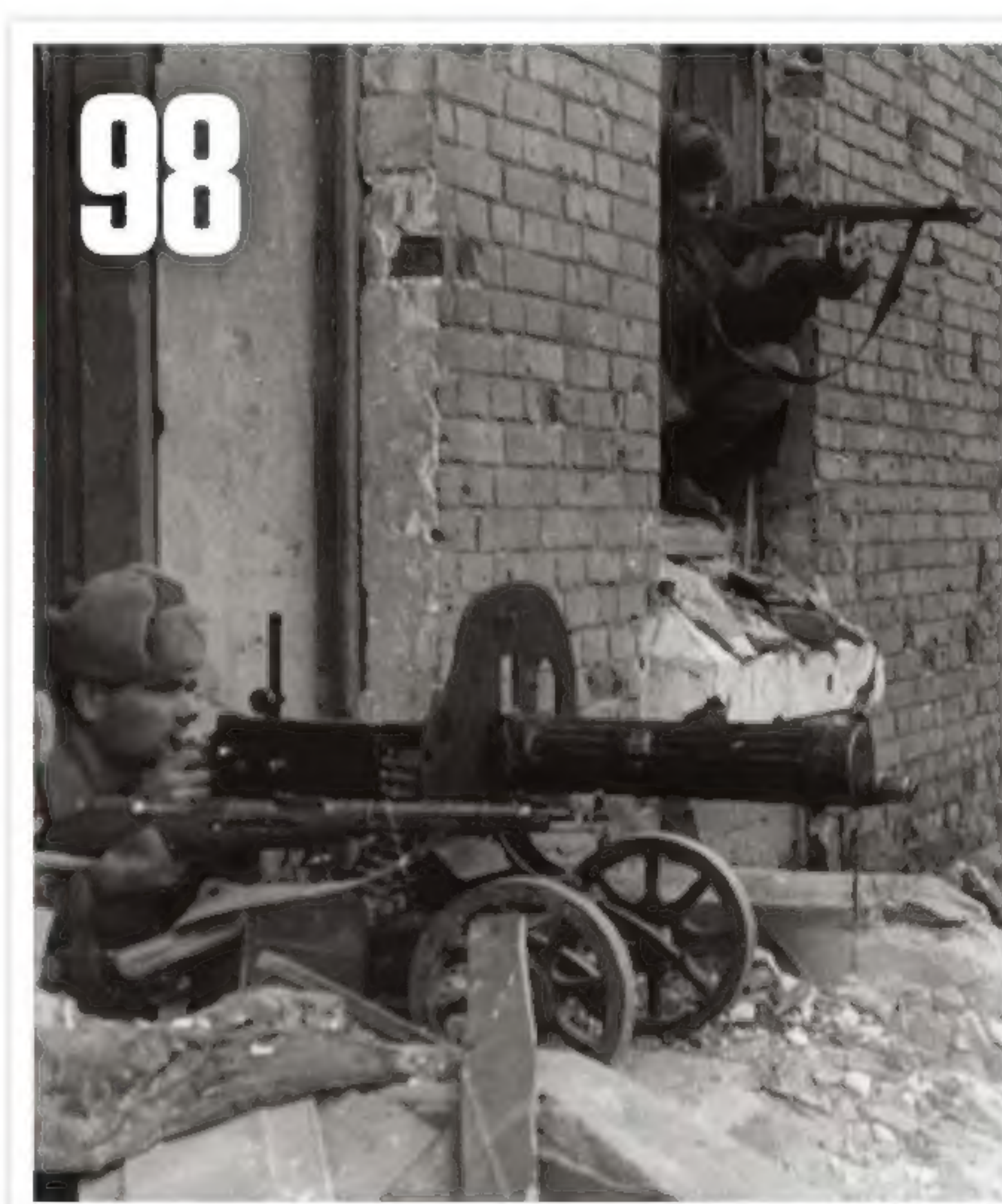
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# SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION

Nazi Germany's assault on the USSR was not a spontaneous act of hostility: Hitler had longed for its destruction for many years









# KICKING IN THE DOOR

WORDS: DAVID SMITH

## German planning for Barbarossa was detailed... but fatally flawed

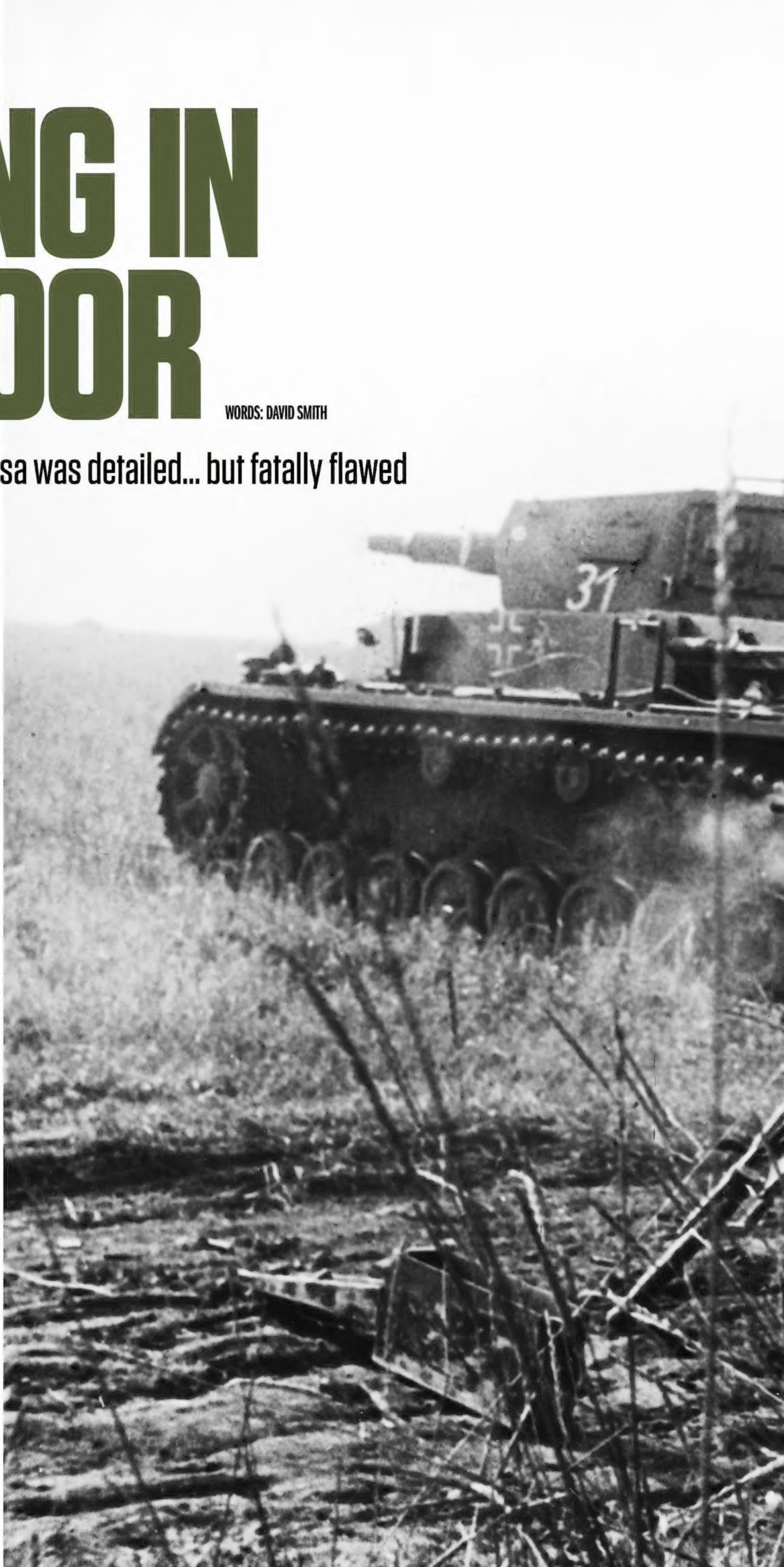
**P**rior to his rise to power Hitler had made no secret of the fact that an invasion of the Soviet Union was his overriding focus. His developing paranoia over perceived Jewish influences, his violent disdain for the Slavic peoples and his hatred of Bolshevism combined into a poisonous cocktail. Also important was his lust for new territory in which to house an expanding German population, the famous *lebensraum* (living space) of which he often spoke. The vast tracts of land seemingly available to the east were simply irresistible in this regard, and the Germans held Soviet military capability in low esteem.

Hitler made no effort to hide his hatred of the Soviet Union. He signed the Anti-Comintern Pact (the 'Agreement against the Communist International' to give it its full title) with Japan in 1936, having already broken an arms pact with the USSR three years earlier. The Spanish Civil War was also in many ways a proxy war between Germany and the Soviets. By 1939, Hitler was drawing up plans for Eastern Europe that were every bit as sinister as his 'Final Solution' would be for the Jewish people. Nothing short of genocide was proposed for the Slavs in the lands to the east.

Emerging from the hard ground of this implacable and open hostility, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 appears to be a baffling contradiction, pledging five-years of non-aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union. In reality it was merely a brief marriage of convenience that allowed the two powers to carve up Poland.

It was here that Hitler's planning began to come unstuck. Britain and France stood by their treaties with Poland and declared war on Germany, giving Hitler two major powers to deal with to the west before he could turn his attentions back to the East. Also in 1939, Stalin invaded Finland and ran into severe difficulties, reinforcing the German prejudice against the quality of the Soviet military.

It would be the end of 1940 (following the fall of France and defeat for Germany in the Battle of Britain) before Hitler allowed himself to focus once more on what had always been his primary goal.





**“HITLER MADE NO EFFORT TO HIDE  
HIS HATRED OF THE SOVIET UNION”**





## SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION

Speaking at the Berghof conference in August 1939, Hitler had made his intentions crystal clear.

"There is no time to lose. War must come in my lifetime. My pact [the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact] was meant only to stall for time, and gentlemen, to Russia will happen just what I have practiced with Poland – we will crush the Soviet Union."

His timetable for action, however, turned out to be subject to modification. In November 1939 he said he would move against the Soviets as soon as he had brought all of Western Europe to heel. In early 1940 he declared that only the fall of France was necessary for him to initiate his attack on the USSR. General Franz Halder was instructed to start preparing detailed plans as the Battle of Britain raged, with the aim of launching an assault before the end of the year, but logistical concerns meant that was impossible to achieve.

Nevertheless, the first moves were already being made. Planning for an invasion of Britain was at least partly intended to throw Stalin off the scent and convince him that Germany's eyes were still firmly fixed to the west. In reality, transport infrastructure, including roads and railway lines, was already under construction in the East.

Stalin was not blind to the danger, but he was determined not to antagonise Hitler. Negotiations were held between Ribbentrop and Molotov with regards to the Soviets being admitted into the Tripartite Pact. This defensive arrangement

between Germany, Japan and Italy promised military assistance if any of the signatories were attacked. The pact was primarily aimed at deterring the U.S. from intervening in the war, but the Soviets felt isolated by their exclusion. Molotov made several concessions in an attempt to gain admittance to the pact but was unsuccessful.

Planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union was already underway. In July 1940, generals Georg von Küchler (who believed that it was Germany's duty to "dissolve the Russian state" and that all commissars should be shot) and Erich Marcks had begun work on a plan of defence for the East, but it quickly shifted gear into an offensive.

Hitler's overconfidence was at least partially understandable. Having overrun Poland and France, there was a feeling that blitzkrieg tactics were unstoppable. At the same time, there was contempt for the Soviet military, fuelled in part by memories of the collapse of Russian forces in WWI. A disparaging (and inaccurate) assessment of Soviet military capability was rattled off in four days by Lieutenant Colonel Eberhard Kinzel, and this formed the basis of Germany's assessment of the Soviets' likely response to an invasion.

These factors conspired to convince many that the Soviets could be toppled quickly. As Hitler himself said, "We have only to kick in the front door and the whole rotten Russian edifice will come tumbling down."

That is not to say that there weren't dissenting opinions among senior German officers. Many saw the huge risk inherent in invading the Soviet Union, but few – if any – ever dared to challenge the Führer.

The invasion plan, officially 'Directive 21' but carrying the code name 'Fritz', was not ready until 12 December 1940. Hitler changed the codename to 'Barbarossa', in honour of the 12th-century German monarch Frederick I, the Holy Roman Emperor, and a start date of 15 May was proposed. The general staff got to work, albeit reluctantly – some had tentatively raised concerns over opening a second front in the East while still engaged in the West, but Hitler, flushed with success, brushed all such worries aside. Ribbentrop was particularly dismayed, still seeing hope for long-term Soviet-German cooperation, but he prudently decided against opposing the Führer.

Initial planning was for a two-pronged invasion of Soviet territory, with the focus on a drive towards Moscow supported by a secondary thrust further north. Extensive wargaming throughout the autumn of 1940 had refined the plan and also highlighted that units operating against the Baltic states would struggle. Hitler took this on board and envisaged diverting units from the main army group to support those to the north if necessary. A third army group was also added that would operate to the south.





Frederick Barbarossa, Holy Roman Emperor, in whose honour the operation was named



This German postcard depicts the invasion of the USSR in surprisingly accurate detail



Panzer divisions were to provide the cutting edge for the three army groups slated to invade the Soviet Union

Further wargaming emphasised how important logistics would be for an operation on such a scale, and pauses were built into the schedule to allow for supplies to catch up with the spearhead units.

The line of the Dvina-Dnepr rivers was selected as a good place to regroup, and there were dark warnings that if the Soviet forces were still intact at this point they would be almost impossible to destroy in the territory further east, where road and rail provisions were so poor that the rapid advances crucial for blitzkrieg tactics to work would be all but impossible to execute.

Army Group North, the smallest of the three forces, comprised seven divisions and three panzer divisions, commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb. He had 500 miles to cover in order to capture his primary target, Leningrad. Unsurprisingly, his panzer corps was to be the spearhead, piercing the Soviet defensive line and moving towards the Dvina River.

Field Marshal Feder von Bock took command of Army Group Centre, boasting 42 divisions and nine panzer divisions. His panzer corps (with one part commanded by Heinz Guderian) was split to protect his flanks, with infantry in the centre. They were expected to repeatedly encircle and annihilate Red Army units. The complete destruction of the Red Army before crossing the Dvina and Dnepr rivers was considered essential.

Finally, Army Group South was a hodgepodge of German, Romanian, Hungarian and Italian forces totalling 52 divisions, with five more panzer divisions, commanded by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt. He was tasked with invading Ukraine and then turning southeast to reach the Black Sea.

Total Axis strength was around 3.8 million men, with 3,000 tanks, 7,000 pieces of artillery and 2,500 aircraft. As the Germans prepared to launch Barbarossa, their expectations were clear. There would be fierce fighting after crossing the border, but the Red Army would be crushed within a few weeks. After that, progress through the rest of the country would face only weak resistance.

It is difficult to comprehend how such a woeful assessment of Soviet strength could have been compiled, but there was at least one concession to the enormity of the task facing the Germans – it was accepted that occupying the whole of the USSR was impossible. Therefore, an imaginary line was drawn between Arkhangelsk, on the White Sea, and Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea.

This line, proposed by Erich Marcks and dubbed the 'A-A line', would give Germany control over the bulk of Soviet resources, including food production and oil. It would also place Germany outside the range of Soviet bombers. Any significant targets east of the A-A line were earmarked for bombing.

Planning for Barbarossa was complete. The war against 'Judeo-Bolshevism' that Hitler had always longed for now loomed, and it was a conflict he believed the Almighty would look upon favourably.

"Eternal Nature inexorably avenges the infringement of her commands. I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord."



# GENERALPLAN OST

The Nazis had a plan to colonise Eastern Europe. Had it been realised, it would have had devastating consequences for millions of people WORDS: ADAM QUARSHIE



*Left: Soviet prisoners of war being marched through southern Ukraine, June 1942*



**I**n 1941 Nazi Germany was approaching the peak of its military power, while the murderous intentions and imperialist ambitions of its leadership were becoming increasingly clear. On 22 June the Nazi war machine launched an invasion of the Soviet Union – codenamed Operation Barbarossa – sending the largest invasion force ever seen and opening up the Eastern Front, which would soon become the bloodiest theatre of WWII.

But the advance eastwards was more than just a military assault. German expansion towards the East, or *Drang nach Osten*, had long been an aim of German nationalists seeking to create a larger and more dominant German nation. The Nazi concept of *Lebensraum*, or ‘living space’, meant that aggressive territorial expansion was a central principle behind its military strategy. In Eastern Europe this concept would be taken to its most sinister and shocking conclusions.

The invasion of the Soviet Union was merely one aspect of a broader geopolitical strategy known as Generalplan Ost (Master Plan for the East). Under this strategy, the Nazi Government sought to colonise and ‘Germanise’ a huge swathe of Central and Eastern Europe, with the overall aim of creating a racial empire by destroying the existing population. The plan represented the Nazi regime in all its cold, calculating brutality – a mixture of economic imperatives combined with vicious racial ideology. If it had been successful, it would have led to the annihilation – by way of deportation, forced labour, starvation and mass killing – of up to 30 million people. Generalplan Ost was epic in scope and genocidal in intention.

Several different versions of the document laying out Generalplan Ost have been discovered, most of which date to the years 1941 to 1942, though the

**“IT WOULD HAVE LED TO THE ANNIHILATION – BY WAY OF DEPORTATION, FORCED LABOUR, STARVATION AND MASS KILLING – OF UP TO 30 MILLION PEOPLE”**





German tanks assembling near Rzhev, Russia, on 5 September 1942

first draft was written in 1940. The plan was drawn up by functionaries of the Reich Main Security Office (RHSA), an organisation whose stated aim was to fight internal and external 'enemies of the Reich'. These authors included Hans Ehlich, a doctor turned SS colonel, and Konrad Meyer, an agronomist and spatial planner who also came to work for the SS. Both men ultimately answered to Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer of the SS who had risen to become one of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany and would later become one of the chief architects of the Holocaust.

Generalplan Ost sought to conquer a number of countries, including parts of the Soviet Union, Poland, the Czech Republic – then still part of Czechoslovakia – Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. One aspect of the plan was economic: the intention was to seize the oil fields in the Caucasus and the grain fields of Ukraine in order to divert this food supply towards the German Army, which was now fighting on two fronts.

However, Generalplan Ost was ultimately ideological: it sought to expand German territory, seize productive agricultural land and eventually replace the existing population with German settlers. The plan contained both short- and longer-term goals. The *Kleine Planung*, or Small Plan, referred to the actions that would be taken over the course of the war, while the *Grosse*

*Planung* referred to a longer time frame of 25 to 30 years after the Nazis envisioned winning the war.

It was in the details of the *Grosse Planung* that the true scope of the plan was revealed. With chilling precision, the plan estimated that tens of millions of people would have to be removed from the conquered areas, either by deporting them en masse to Siberia or by outright murder. The precise proportion of each population deemed to be disposable was calculated according to the brutal dictates of Nazi racial theory, ranging from 50 per cent of Estonians to 80 to 85 per cent of Poles. Poland, a country that had already suffered immensely from the brutalities of the Nazi regime since it was invaded in 1939, would have been effectively destroyed as a nation, a crime of monumental proportions that fit with the Nazi belief that Poland had no right to exist.

Though the final version of Generalplan Ost was dated October 1942, it was gradually abandoned as the German Army was pushed back by the Red Army, eventually suffering defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad, which ended in February 1943. Though the Nazis were unable to fully implement the plan, it led to huge loss of life and shocking treatment of those living in occupied areas.

Had it been fully implemented, it would have represented the full depths of depravity of the Nazi regime in what was already one of the bleakest chapters in European history.

## THE HUNGER PLAN

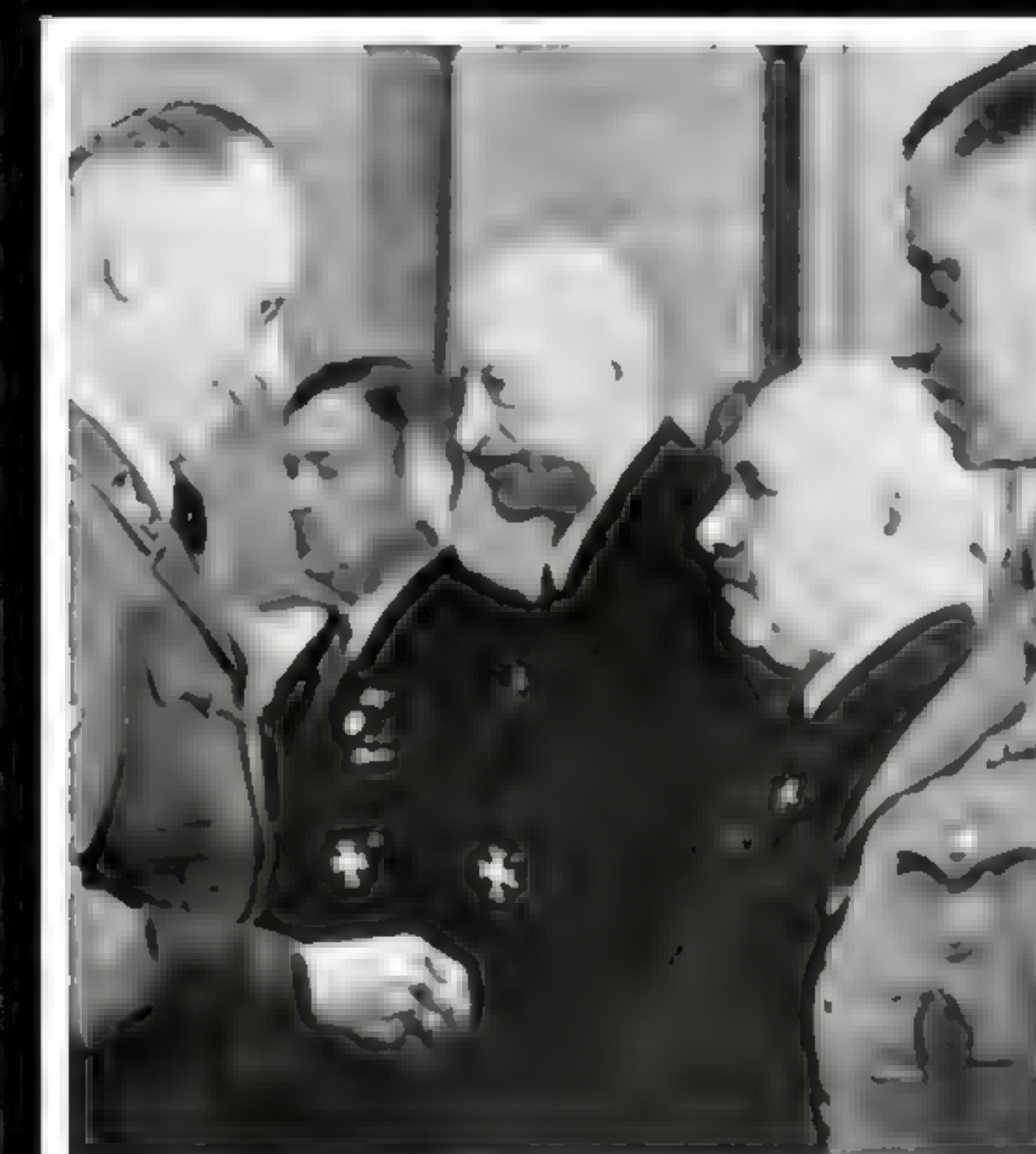
The Hunger Plan sought to seize Soviet food supplies, starving millions to death as a result

On 2 May 1941, a group of *Staatssekretäre* (state secretaries) met in Berlin. The purpose of their meeting? To decide what should happen to the food supply of conquered territories in Eastern Europe. Though the minutes of the meeting, which have been pored over by scholars, do not contain the names of those who attended, it is believed that a group of between 12 and 18 high-ranking German officials and army officers were present.

The main outcome of the meeting was a strategy that has come to be known as the 'Hunger Plan'. It was a plot to seize Soviet food supplies from so-called 'surplus territories' in Ukraine, southern Russia and the Caucasus and redirect them to the German Army. The effects of this would have been horrific: it was essentially a plan for mass murder by means of an engineered famine.

Though the Hunger Plan was never fully implemented, it nonetheless had devastating consequences. Its primary victims were the more than 3 million Soviet soldiers captured by the German Army. Of these, it's estimated that close to 2 million were deliberately starved to death in prisoner-of-war camps.

The minutes of the May 1941 meeting were eventually used as evidence of war crimes during the Nuremberg trials. Herbert Backe (seen below receiving a medal in the Reichstag), a prominent minister who went on to become Reich Minister for Food in 1942, was one of the principal authors of the strategy. He was put on trial at Nuremberg but committed suicide in his cell in April 1947.







# AN ALLIANCE WITH THE ENEMY

WORDS: CHARLES GINGER

The Soviet Union was willing to side with anyone in its quest to survive the carnage of WWII

One of the most intriguing threads that ran throughout the course of WWII was the Soviet Union's pragmatic ability to switch its alliances as events unfolded. It was a chameleonesque trait that would dramatically influence the course of the entire conflict.

As with many superpowers, the Soviet Union was born in the blood and ruin of war. In October 1917, Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks toppled the Russian Provisional Government, which had itself formed after the bloody overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II. The result of Lenin's push for power was the formation of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (Russian SFSR) and a merciless civil war that is estimated to have claimed between 7 and 12 million lives.

Following the Red Army's (Bolshevik) victory over the counter-revolutionary forces of the White Army in 1922 (minor battles did continue into 1923), the communists formed the Soviet Union by uniting the Russian, Transcaucasian (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), Ukrainian and Byelorussian republics. An 86.5-million-square-mile state was born, ruling over a population of



## “THE SOVIETS BEGAN SECRET TALKS WITH THE GERMANS WHILE HOLDING DISCUSSIONS WITH BRITAIN AND FRANCE”

approximately 160 to 170 million citizens, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, the son of Georgian peasants, its undisputed leader.

During Stalin's ruthless reign the Soviet Union's borders proved to be a contentious issue. The first major dispute occurred in 1935 as the relatively young state clashed with Japanese forces in the Chinese province of Manchuria. Preceded by numerous incidents where both the Soviet and Japanese patrols accidentally (and occasionally intentionally) violated the borders of this occupied region, this was in fact the first occasion in which guns were fired, and it became known as the Halhamiao Incident.

A series of clashes occurred over the following years, culminating in the decisive defeat of Japanese forces at the Battle of Khalkin Gol in September 1939. Under the direction of Georgy Zhukov, the Red Army deployed tactics that would later prove invaluable in the fight against the German invasion. On 13 April 1941, the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact was signed, finally putting an end to a war that was never formally declared by either side.

Even before its eastern borders had been settled, the Soviet Union had turned its gaze westwards to Poland and the mighty German state beyond it. The existence of a Polish state had been a contentious issue for Russia as far back as the Napoleonic era. Despite Hitler openly stating in his book, *Mein Kampf*, that the living space (*Lebensraum*) that he believed Germany desperately needed lay in the East and could only be taken by invading the Soviet territories, Stalin could not resist the temptation of discussing the division of Poland with the Nazi Government.

In a sign of the duplicitous nature of his government, the Soviets began secret talks with Germany while holding simultaneous discussions with Britain and France. With military and diplomatic ties between Germany and the USSR all but severed, the deal adopted the guise of an economic agreement. As officials thrashed out its terms (a key one being a German loan of 200 million Reichsmarks to the USSR at an interest rate of 4.5 per cent) the French and British delegates arrived in Moscow to discuss military matters.

### Devils' pact

Fatefully for Poland, the talks fell apart due to Poland's refusal to allow Soviet troops to enter its territory in the event of a German attack. Their rebuttal was based on the very prescient assumption that once the Red Army crossed the border it would never leave. With an impasse reached on 21 August, Stalin decided to act quickly, hoping to conclude dealings with Germany. On 23 August, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was



signed, named after the foreign ministers of both countries, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov.

Its main term dictated that Poland was to be partitioned between the Germans and the Soviets, with the half east of the Vistula River handed to Stalin and the Soviet Union. Finland, Latvia, Estonia and Bessarabia were also chosen to enter the Soviet 'sphere of influence'.

On 1 September 1939, the Germans unleashed their vicious invasion of Poland, scything through the defences they encountered in a thrust towards Warsaw. But the Polish did not immediately capitulate, instead regrouping to mount a fierce if ultimately doomed counterattack. Unaware of the agreement that had already decided their fate, the Polish expected the Red Army to come to their aid. So, when the Soviets fulfilled their side of the bargain by invading Poland from the east on 17 September, they were greeted in some parts of Poland as liberators.

This not unreasonable assumption had resulted in the bulk of the Polish Army (which by this point consisted of around 750,000 men) being sent westwards to confront the Germans. This left approximately 20,000 troops to watch the eastern borders. With reports placing the strength of the Soviet invasion force between 450,000 and 1 million men, it's easy to see why these valiant Polish soldiers never stood a chance.

Both the Germans and the Soviets immediately set about dismantling the apparatus of the Polish state. Intriguingly, the Nazis viewed the Polish as an inferior race that had no right to an independent nation, while the Soviets viewed the nation of Poland as the product of its elite, educated classes. Yet both ideologies resulted in the same outcome: the massacre of Polish nationals.

Schooled in efficient killing by the Great Terror of 1937–1938, which was the ruthless purging of Communist Party and government officials, along with the widespread oppression of the peasantry,



## PARADE AT BREST-LITOVSK

The German-Soviet military parade in Brest-Litovsk was symbolic for many reasons. First, it was the city in which the Russians had signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk during WWI, ending their participation in the conflict. The terms of the treaty were largely dictated by the Germans and inflicted on the Russians. Holding a joint military parade in this location 19 years later was not a coincidence.

It also provided both sides with an opportunity to show the world that Poland was beyond saving. Holding it six days before the Polish formally surrendered proved that the fate of the occupied territory was already sealed. The ceremony marked the official withdrawal of the German troops to the western half of Poland and the handover of the city and fortress of Brest-Litovsk to the Soviets.

the NKVD (Soviet secret police) began to remove the intellectual classes (officials, landowners, policemen and army officers). The purpose of this was to eradicate the 'threat' of Polish nationalism. Polish Jews were deported en masse to the Gulags (labour camps) in the frozen Siberian tundra, while executions became a regular occurrence, a prime example of which was the shooting of 21,892 Polish officers in the Katyn Forest and four other locations in April 1940.

Such was the eagerness of the invading forces to cooperate, the Germans and Soviets held a joint parade in Brest-Litovsk, and their troops often met one another in friendly encounters throughout Poland. On one occasion, the Germans even handed a conquered fortress over to their allies.

### Winter War

As the bloodshed continued in this newly occupied territory, a new target emerged for Stalin: Finland. With the territorial and military concessions set out for the Baltic states in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

secured, the Soviets expected Finland to similarly acquiesce. But to Stalin's consternation, the small Scandinavian state remained resolute in its refusal to fold under pressure. When 'negotiations' with the Soviets collapsed on 13 November 1939, the Finns knew they had little time to reinforce the 93-mile-long Mannerheim Line – their key line of defence – named after their commander-in-chief, Carl Mannerheim.

The Soviets based their hastily drawn up invasion plan on a swift campaign, with the aim of concluding operations by 21 December, Stalin's 60th birthday. Considering that the Finns were massively outnumbered, possessed tsarist-era howitzers, lacked any tanks and only had enough artillery shells for a week of fighting, it's plain to see why the Soviets were so confident. But as is often the case in any war, this hubris ultimately proved to be unfounded.

When the Soviets crossed the border on 30 November, they encountered ferocious resistance. The main thrust into Finland was conducted by the 7th Army along the Karelia Isthmus. It got off to a horrendous start as the Finns, careful to avoid fighting in the open, exploited the forest terrain to good effect. They also benefitted from having history's most lethal sniper in their ranks, Simo Hayha. In the space of 100 days (before a gunshot wound to the face forced his withdrawal) the man known as 'the White Death' killed 542 Soviets.

The Finnish forces held on until early March 1940, despite the mammoth forces ranged against them. The signing of the Moscow Peace Treaty on 12 March put an end to a campaign that had cost the Soviets over 200,000 men. In return, Finland could count the loss of approximately 25,000 dead and territories including the Gulf of Finland Islands.

The shambolic performance of the Red Army had a profound effect on Germany. Unbeknownst to Stalin, it reinforced Hitler's opinion that the Soviet Union was a rotten house that would collapse the moment its front door was kicked in. As swathes of Europe fell to the unstoppable Wehrmacht in 1940, it seemed logical to expect a similar outcome in the Soviet states. Hitler's eastern 'Garden of Eden' appeared more attainable than ever before.

Incredibly, the paranoid mind of Stalin led him to discount numerous warnings of the impending disaster, including those compiled by Richard

German and Soviet commanders stand together at the parade in Brest-Litovsk



## THE SOVIET'S DIFFERENT ALLIANCES

### MOLOTOV-RIBBENTROP PACT SIGNED

Following the collapse of talks with the British and French, the Soviet Union signs its infamous pact with Germany, laying the foundations for the division of Poland and the Baltics.  
**23 AUGUST 1939**

### GERMAN INVASION OF POLAND

The Germans cross the Polish border and begin their ruthless invasion, sweeping the stunned Polish military aside.  
**1 SEPTEMBER 1939**

### BATTLE OF KHALKIN GOL

Following years of skirmishes on the Manchurian border, the Red Army conclusively defeats the Japanese at Khalkin Gol, putting an end to hostilities.  
**11 MAY – 15 SEPTEMBER 1939**

### SOVIET INVASION OF POLAND

As outlined in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union invades Poland from the east, killing off hopes that Poland could hold out against invasion.  
**17 SEPTEMBER 1939**

### POLAND SURRENDERS

Despite putting up a valiant fight, the Polish military leadership realise the situation is doomed and finally agree to sign the surrender papers.  
**28 SEPTEMBER 1939**

### THE WINTER WAR

With the east of Poland and the Baltic states now under its control, the Soviets expect Finland to agree to its terms. But they stand firm, resulting in a Soviet invasion and the Winter War.  
**30 NOVEMBER 1939**

### FINLAND COMES TO TERMS

Unable to invade the whole of Finland, the Soviets finally convince the exhausted Finns to accept their terms and end hostilities. The Moscow Peace Treaty is signed.  
**13 MARCH 1940**

### SOVIET-JAPANESE NEUTRALITY PACT

In order to ensure that both sides remain neutral during WWII, the Soviets sign a non-aggression pact with their former enemies. This extinguishes the threat of a Japanese invasion from the east.  
**13 APRIL 1941**





*Berlin's fate was officially decided between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta in February 1945. Unofficially, Churchill had other ideas*

Sorge, a spy in Tokyo with strong connections to the German embassy. Even the Red Orchestra, a spy network gathering information in the heart of Berlin, couldn't convince Stalin, whose judgement could not have been further off the mark.

On the morning of 22 June 1941, the Germans unleashed hell. Divided into three armies (North, Centre and South) a force of 3.8 million soldiers took the Soviets completely by surprise. Poorly distributed and warned only to shoot in self-defence, the Red Army ranks were paralysed by fear and confusion. General Heinz Guderian's motorised forces exploited the situation, carving up vast tracts of Soviet territory while mowing down the fleeing enemy troops. The genocidal war that Hitler had always wanted had begun.

In the face of this existential threat Stalin had little choice but to turn to the West for help. He quickly signed his empire up to the Allied Coalition alongside Britain and the US (not actively engaged at this point), as well as a host of other countries. For the rest of the war, the Big Three (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin) would cooperate in the fight against Germany.

Supplies were shipped to the Soviet territories in Atlantic convoys and included tanks, jeeps,

weaponry and, most importantly, food. With vital agricultural terrain, including the 'breadbasket' of Ukraine, in German hands, the Soviet population once again faced the very real and harrowing prospect of starvation.

Cooperation between the British and the Soviets would rise to a whole new level on 25 August 1941 with their joint invasion of Iran. The purpose of Operation Countenance was the seizure of Iranian oilfields and ensuring that Allied supply routes in the Persian Corridor were secure. The invasion was deemed necessary by the Allies as they believed the Iranian King Reza Shah harboured sympathies for the Axis cause. By 17 September, the king had been deposed and both strategic objectives had been achieved.

Iran was also the location for the first meeting between the three main Allied leaders. Held at the Soviet embassy in the Iranian capital, the Tehran Conference (28 November to 1 December 1943) concluded with the Western Allies agreeing to open a second front in the war against Germany, something that Stalin had long been calling for.

It seems incredible that the Soviet Union began WWII as a German ally yet concluded it by participating in the destruction of Berlin (not to

mention the widescale raping of German women and girls and the indiscriminate slaughtering of innocent civilians) as part of the Allied powers, having seen vast swathes (the Germans occupied ten per cent of the USSR at the greatest extent of the invasion) of its own land decimated by Hitler's merciless forces.

Both prior to and during the conflict, Stalin only ever acted in the interest of the Soviet Union, willingly siding with whomever he felt best served his cause. It is fair to say that his main concern was the extension of Soviet influence, and he had no qualms about inflicting terror upon other sovereign nations or even his own people at times in order to ultimately achieve it. To Stalin, the most catastrophic conflagration in human history came to represent an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the world to his and the USSR's benefit.

Equally, when the snake with whom he'd signed a pact suddenly turned and bit him, he instantly sought the help of former enemies in his efforts to kill it and ensure his own survival and that of the empire he ruled. Of all the key players in WWII, Stalin was the one who managed to manipulate the others most effectively, knowing the influence that he carried on the geopolitical stage.

#### **OPERATION BARBAROSSA**

The German invasion of the Soviet Union begins in a blaze of artillery and confusion as the Soviets are taken by surprise. Stalin had refused to believe that Hitler would launch such an attack on them.  
**22 JUNE 1941**

#### **SOVIETS JOIN ALLIED COALITION**

In the face of the Germans' betrayal of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Stalin endorses the Western Allies and signs the Soviet Union into the Allied Coalition ranged against the Axis he formerly allied with.  
**JUNE 1941**

#### **ALLIED SUPPLIES TO SOVIET UNION**

A major factor in the Soviets' ability to keep fighting and feed their people was the aid provided by the West. Under the terms of the Lend-Lease, the US supplied the Soviets, with food, weaponry, vehicles, metals and fuel.  
**1941 ONWARDS**

#### **ANGLO-SOVIET INVASION OF IRAN**

Codenamed Operation Countenance, the British and the Soviets work together to conquer Iran in order to secure the oilfields for the Soviets and secure the Persian Corridor.  
**25 AUGUST - 17 SEPTEMBER 1941**

#### **BATTLE FOR MOSCOW**

Following their crushing defeat in the Vyazma-Bryansk battles, the Soviets are pushed further back towards their capital as the Germans attempt to end the war with a final push on Moscow.  
**OCTOBER 1941**

#### **OPERATION URANUS**

As the fighting rages in and around the city of Stalingrad, the Soviets begin a major offensive against their former allies. The operation ends with the complete encirclement and destruction of the German 6th Army.  
**19 NOVEMBER 1942**

#### **TEHRAN CONFERENCE**

Held in the Soviet embassy in Tehran, the leaders of the 'Big Three' meet for the first time. Stalin implores Roosevelt and Churchill to open a second front against the Germans, a request that they agree to.  
**28 NOVEMBER - 2 DECEMBER 1943**



# PURGED TO THE BONE

Robbed of many of its finest officers by Stalin's paranoia, a weakened Red Army faced the prospect of destruction in 1941

**O**n 11 June 1937, Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Tukhachevsky stood looking at the board of judges assembled to try him. Tukhachevsky was the youngest marshal of the Red Army, a clear-thinking strategist who had developed ideas of deep operations in the enemy's rear. He had led the invasion of Poland during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, coming within a whisker of capturing Warsaw and winning the war for the Soviet Union. Although from an aristocratic background he was a committed Communist, an atheist and the most brilliant general in the Soviet Union. Stalin had therefore marked Tukhachevsky down as a threat to his power and decided to eliminate him.

Standing before the judges, all Marshals of the Soviet Union as he was, Tukhachevsky muttered, "I feel I'm dreaming." He had been accused, along with seven other senior Red Army officers, of being an agent of Nazi Germany. His signed confession, along with confessions signed by the other accused men, was presented to the judges as evidence of his guilt. Never mind that Tukhachevsky's confession was splashed with brown marks – his own blood, spattered over the paper as the interrogators had forced him to sign.

The men appointed to try Tukhachevsky were, if anything, even more scared than he was. By this point, Tukhachevsky knew that he was doomed. The judges, caught in the atmosphere of collective paranoia that Stalin had engendered to ensure the Great Purge would be accepted by the Party, could sense that similar condemnation might await them: a swift verdict of guilt was one of the few ways they had of trying to avert their own downfalls.

The judges duly delivered guilty verdicts on Tukhachevsky and his fellow defendants. Their decision was conveyed to Stalin. "Agreed." That single word was enough. Within the hour, the

WORDS: EDOARDO ALBERT







*A review of the Red Army,  
Moscow, 1920. Victory in the war  
against the White Movement  
was still three years away*



## SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION

*Despite the Red Army's modernisation in the 1930s, it remained heavily dependent on horses for a large part of its transport*



chief of the NKVD, Nikolai Yezhov, who had been waiting with Stalin for the verdict, went to the prison to supervise Tukhachevsky's execution. Tukhachevsky was taken from his cell and, while Yezhov watched, NKVD executioner Vasily Blokhin shot Tukhachevsky in the back of the head.

Stalin, always interested in the last words of the men he had condemned to death, asked Yezhov to report what Tukhachevsky had said when he knew he was about to die. Yezhov told him that Tukhachevsky had protested his loyalty to the Soviet Union and to Stalin.

It did not matter. After Tukhachevsky's death, his wife and brothers were also executed and his sisters sent to a gulag, as was his only daughter when she reached adulthood. As for the judges who had condemned Tukhachevsky, one had said during the trial, "Tomorrow, I'll be put in the same place." He was right. Almost all of them were later killed too.

The trial of Marshal Tukhachevsky, while conducted in secret, became the opening move in the Great Purge, a cruel, bloodsoaked campaign waged by Stalin against the only remaining (perceived) threat to his power: the officers of the

Red Army. During the previous decade, Stalin had systematically eradicated all political rivals within the Communist Party and state agencies such as the NKVD. Only the Red Army remained as a potential rival power base.

Indeed, the fact that the trial and execution of Tukhachevsky and his fellow officers was carried out in secret shows that Stalin remained cautious: the Red Army, after all, had the guns and men to mount serious resistance to him should its officer class decide to unite against him.

However, by fostering an atmosphere of paranoid division within the army's upper ranks, Stalin was able to ensure that no cabal could unite against him, even when he was moving systematically through the upper echelons of the Red Army, executing, imprisoning and exiling its leading officers and their families.

By the end of the Great Purge, three of the five marshals, 13 of 15 high-ranking generals and eight of nine admirals had been removed. The Purge continued down the ranks, removing 50 out of 57 corps commanders, 154 of the 186 division commanders, all 16 army commissars and 25 of 28 corps commissars.

The Great Purge demonstrated where the locus of power lay in the Soviet Union. The Roman Empire was an army with a state attached. The British Empire depended upon the Navy. But the Russian Empire, in its Czarist and Soviet iterations, was the national appendage to its internal security organisation: a secret police state.

With the Red Army depleted of experienced officers, it was no surprise that Soviet forces struggled when the Germans launched Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941. But such was Stalin's desire to find scapegoats for his own previous actions that he even launched a fresh purge in 1941, executing 17 generals on 23 February 1942.

As we all know, the Red Army eventually prevailed, but victory came at a horrific cost in lives lost and men maimed, in body and soul. It was not supposed to be like that when the Red Army was first formed on 28 January 1918. The Imperial Russian Army had imploded under the strain of WWI, dissolving into contending factions, some joining the Communist Red Army, others becoming the nucleus of the White Army faction that was the main opponent to the Bolshevik takeover. Russia's involvement in WWII ended





Red Army soldiers on an armoured train en route to war against the Whites, 1918

with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918, but that was just the signal for the start of the Russian Civil War. To ensure a Communist victory this brutal struggle for power, Leon Trotsky, the head of the Red Army and a key revolutionary ally of Lenin, wisely started to recruit the old Tsarist officer class back into the army, as well as reimposing military discipline and command structures.

With control of the army re-established, Trotsky and Lenin launched a general western offensive to take back territory that the Germans had conquered during WWI. As Germany itself collapsed following the Armistice that ended the Great War, the Red Army moved westward, aiming to install Soviet-style governments in the Baltic States and Poland: in the chaos following the end of the war, everything was in flux and up for grabs.

Poland itself was a result of this period of chaos. The country had ceased to exist in the previous century, its land divided between Russia, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During WWI the territory of Poland was largely occupied by Imperial German forces as they sought to defeat the armies of Tsarist Russia. When Germany

withdrew its forces from the Eastern Front after the collapse of Tsarist Russia to launch the Spring Offensive on the Western Front, Poland suddenly found itself free from imperial domination for the first time in a century and promptly declared itself a republic.

For the Russians, whether Communist or Tsarist, Poland had no legitimacy as an independent state. Expecting Poles to rise in revolt against the Polish Republic, the Red Army attacked, achieving significant success under the leadership of Mikhail Tukhachevsky. Indeed, in the end it came down to the Battle of Warsaw (12–25 August 1920). During a series of battles the Poles managed to decisively defeat the Red Army, forcing it to retreat and establishing Poland's frontier with the Soviet Union (until 1939 at least).

In the longer run, the defeat probably helped the Red Army. The XI Party Congress resolved to reorganise and reduce the size of the army, while generals such as Tukhachevsky applied to it the lessons they had learned during the Russian Civil War and the war with Poland.

The reorganisation of the Red Army appeared to have clearly born fruit during the series of clashes

with Imperial Japan that took place between 1932 and 1939. Japan was expanding into China, invading Manchuria in 1931 and attacking China from 1937. This expanded frontier brought Japan into contact with Soviet Russia, leading to a series of border incidents, skirmishes and outright battles, culminating in the Battle of Khalkhin Gol between 11 May and 16 September 1939. The Red Army and its ally, the army of Mongolia, won a decisive victory, leading to the signing of the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact that endured throughout WWII.

Yet while the Red Army had proved effective in the East, it was found desperately wanting later in 1939, when the Soviet Union invaded Finland on 30 November 1939. A month and a half earlier, the Red Army had invaded Poland again, 16 days after the German attack on the country had triggered WWII. Attacked from east and west, the Poles had struggled bravely but succumbed. The Soviet attack was a consequence of the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, signed on 23 August 1939, between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, pledging non-aggression between the two powers and dividing Eastern Europe between





*A propaganda picture depicting the people of Minsk greeting the entry of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War*

them. The Red Army performed well in Poland – but then the Poles were also dealing with the German blitzkrieg.

When Stalin, in an equally cynical power grab, ordered the Red Army to attack Finland in November, they found themselves facing a focused and determined enemy. Despite outnumbering the Finns hugely (three to one in men, 30 to one in planes and 100 to one in tanks) the Red Army struggled to make any advances, suffering huge losses in comparison to the Finns (estimates suggest 70,000 Finnish casualties against about 350,000 Soviet casualties). However, after a brutal winter of frontal assaults during which the Soviet leadership paid scant regard to their own losses, the Red Army began to advance. On 12 March 1940 Finland signed a peace treaty with the Soviet Union that saw it cede parts of Karelia in the south and part of Salo in the northeast. Nevertheless, the war had proved an international embarrassment for Stalin.

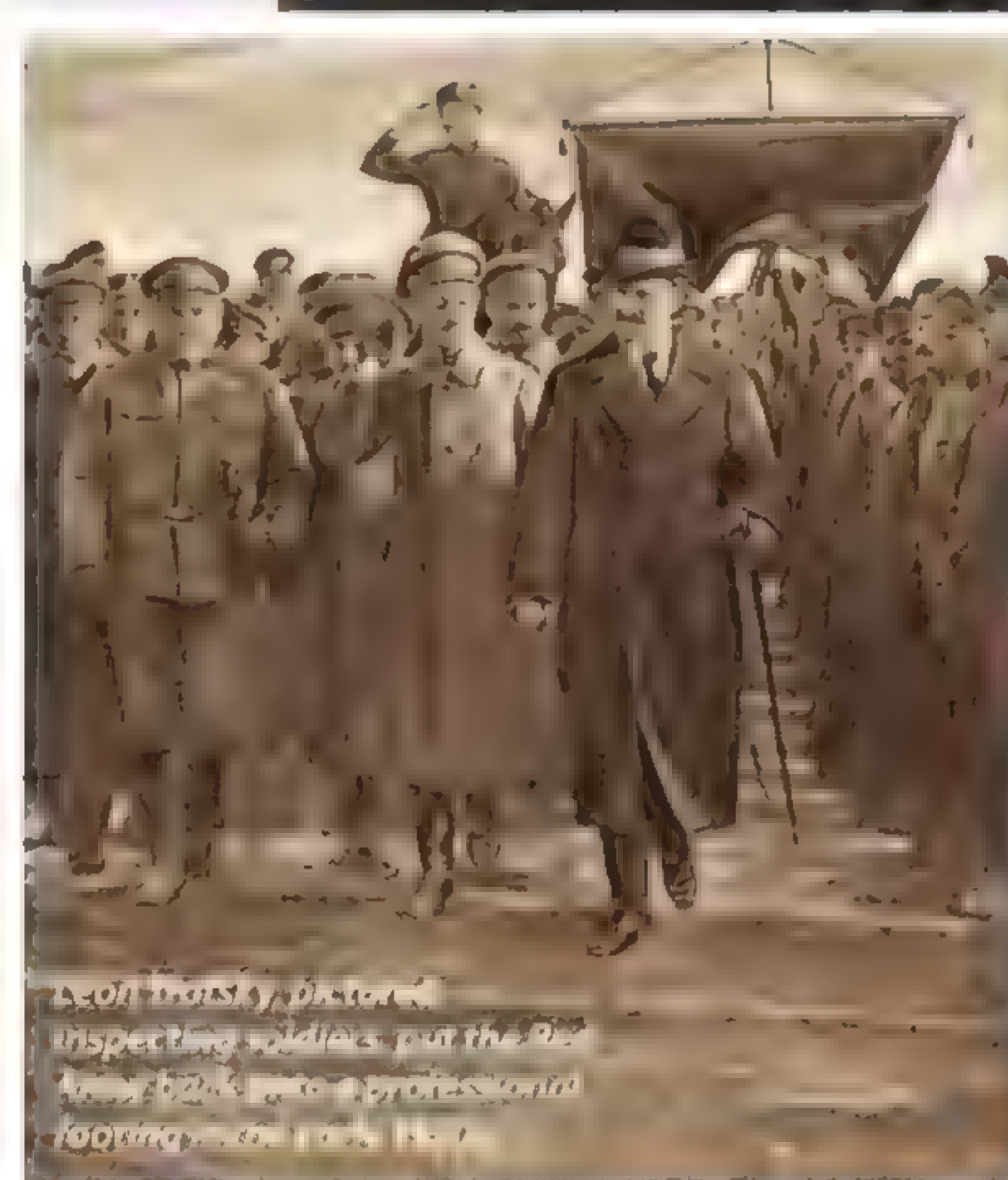
The Winter War had demonstrated all too clearly the effects of the Great Purge upon the Red Army. The invasion was conducted with poor planning and no imagination. But in its development and denouement it also demonstrated the Soviets' willingness to suffer what, for other countries, would be unimaginable losses in order to secure their political aims. Thanks to Stalin's inability to deduce Hitler's true intentions, they would need to suffer many more setbacks before the survival of the fledgling Soviet state could be guaranteed.

That Stalin, a man prepared to betray any treaty or promise in pursuit of power, should be surprised when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union despite the treaty signed between the two powers, is perhaps the single most surprising aspect of his rule. But he appears to have genuinely been completely

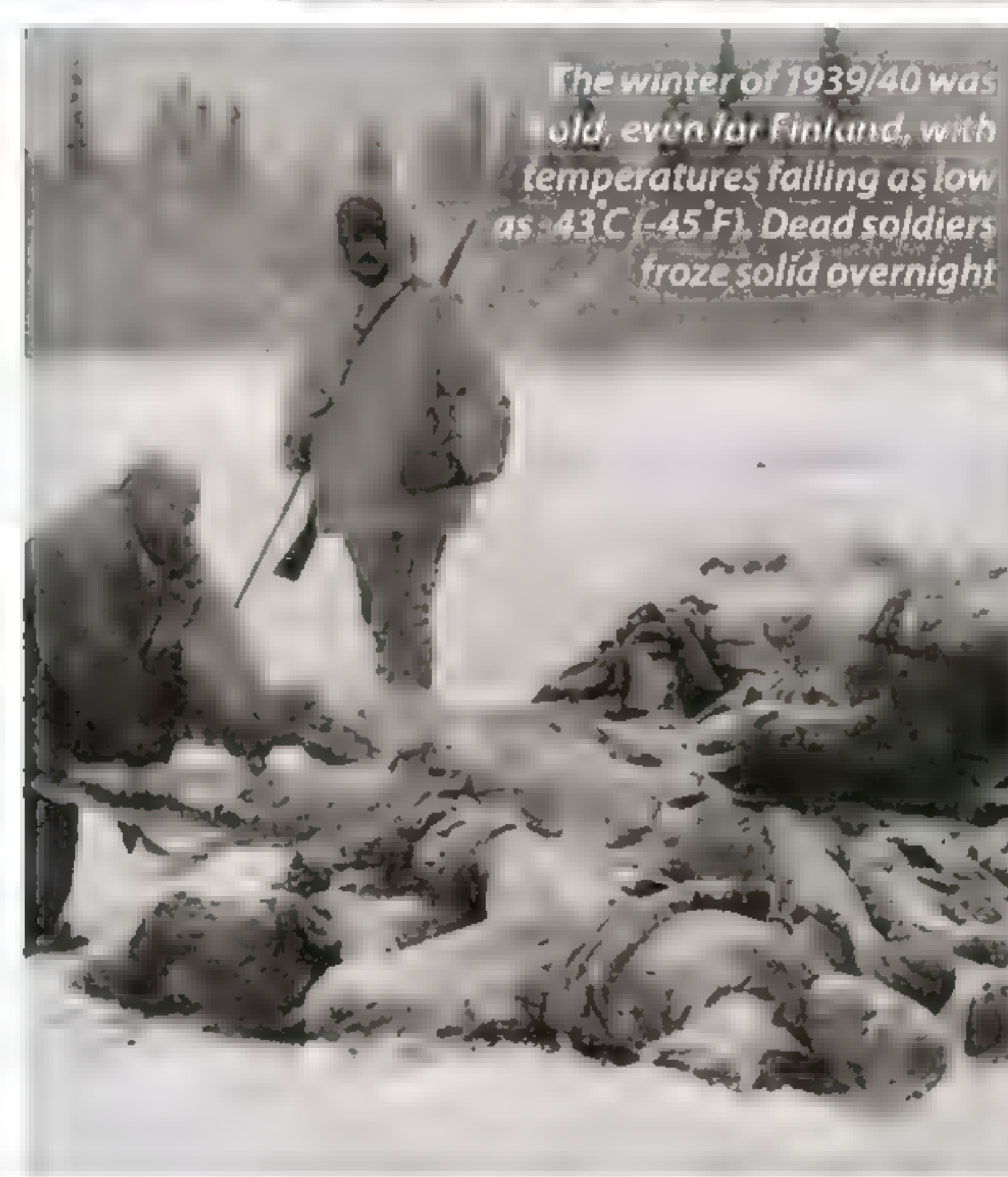
taken aback at the start of Operation Barbarossa, and despite the evidence that pointed towards the glaring truth facing the USSR in the summer of 1941, his suspicions were at least partly valid. Rightly viewing Hitler as a formidable adversary, Stalin reasonably assumed that the Führer was unlikely to initiate a war on two fronts, especially given that Germany and the Soviet Union were each others biggest trading partners by 1941. Without enormous amounts of Soviet coal, oil and iron Hitler could never have waged his war in the West. Why would he then gamble everything on a war with a supposed ally?

Ultimately the annals show just how wrong Stalin was, and the huge losses and defeats suffered by the Soviet Union in the early months of the war were exacerbated by a military leadership that had been decimated on his orders. However, the ruthlessness with which Stalin responded, and which he inculcated in the new generals he installed over the bodies of those who had failed, ensured that the Soviet Union held out.

As for the men who could well have made a difference in the early exchanges with Nazi Germany had they not been executed, there was some small consolation for their surviving family members in the year before the invasion. The man who had overseen the demise of countless innocent officers, Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD, was executed in 1940. He too confessed, just as farcically, to being a spy for the English, the Poles and the Japanese before being condemned. Hearing the sentence, Yezhov became hysterical and was dragged screaming from his cell. In a twist of irony that likely escaped him at the time, he was executed in the basement of an NKVD station that he had designed, the floor sloped so that it could be more easily washed clean of blood.



*Leonid Brezhnev, pictured inspecting soldiers, put the Red Army back into a position of footing in the early 1970s*



*The winter of 1939/40 was cold, even for Finland, with temperatures falling as low as -43°C (-45°F). Dead soldiers froze solid overnight*



*A Red Army soldier stands guard over a downed Polish plane during the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939*





## DEATH AROUND EVERY CORNER

Poised to shoot, the Wehrmacht soldiers in the foreground are manning an MG 34 machine gun in a devastated street on the Eastern Front. Introduced in 1934 (hence the name), this recoil-operated, air-cooled machine gun is widely regarded as the first general-purpose variety ever made. Built to fire 7.92×57mm (0.3×2in) Mauser cartridges, it could shoot up to 900 rounds per minute to a distance of 3,500 metres. Light and versatile, it saw action throughout Europe, from Russia to Normandy.







# ZHUKOV PREPARES FOR THE WORST

WORDS: MIKE HASKEW

Marshal Georgy Zhukov  
is hailed today as one of  
Russia's finest generals



When Adolf Hitler launched the might of the Nazi military machine against the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the sheer scale of the onslaught shocked the senior command of the Red Army. The fact that the Nazis had finally turned on their erstwhile allies was no real surprise to Georgy Zhukov, chief of the Soviet general staff and deputy minister of defence. It was the immense weight of the offensive dubbed Operation Barbarossa that proved shocking. The massive invasion involved three army groups totalling 3.8 million men, 153 divisions, 3,000 tanks, 7,000 artillery pieces, 600,000 motorised vehicles, 625,000 transport horses, and 2,500 combat aircraft.

Zhukov, who had strongly advised Premier Joseph Stalin on numerous occasions to place the Red Army on alert and reinforce critical elements in response to a German threat, was stunned.

"Neither the defence commissariat, myself, my predecessors, B.M. Shaposhnikov and K.A. Meretskov, nor the General Staff thought that the enemy could concentrate such a mass of...forces and commit them on the first day," he admitted.

Nevertheless, Zhukov had done what he could to prepare the Red Army for the expected German invasion of the Soviet Union. Although the full story of the preceding months remains the subject of theory and conjecture, it is clear that some preparations were made while others were vetoed by Stalin for fear of provoking Hitler into launching a pre-emptive attack, a prospect he was utterly terrified of.

Zhukov's role in the planning of both offensive and defensive operations in the event of an outbreak of hostilities with Nazi Germany presents contradictory behaviour at times but also reveals a rationale that led to strategic and tactical decisions that are explainable in context.





*German soldiers march captured Red Army troops to the rear during the early days of Operation Barbarossa*

From Stalin's perspective, the non-aggression pact agreed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union would not hold forever, but it would certainly last beyond 1941 given that Hitler (in Stalin's mind) would never wish to face a war on two fronts. The Red Army high command, therefore, assumed that it could discount the threat of Germany massing troops on the Soviet border. However, in sharp contrast to this belief, large numbers of Red Army troops and armoured formations were indeed moved forward into an offensive posture. Thus, when the Germans attacked, these forces were vulnerable to being overrun and annihilated.

On the eve of Operation Barbarossa, many months after the Nazis and Soviets had signed their pact and proceeded to cooperate in devouring Poland in opening weeks of WWII, Marshal Zhukov was the foremost soldier in the Red Army. Born to a poor family in central Russia on 1 December 1896, he was 44 years old and a veteran of more than 20 years' service, having been conscripted into the Tsar's army in 1914 and received the Cross of St. George twice for courage on the field of battle during the Great War, a conflict that proved to be a disaster for Russia.

Zhukov joined the Bolsheviks after the 1917 October Revolution and served during the Russian Civil War, receiving an officer's commission and the coveted Order of the Red Banner. He steadily rose through the ranks during the inter-war period and survived Stalin's Great Purge of 1936–38.

The devastation wrought on the Red Army and the Soviet Union's officer class during the purge (which also came to be known as the Great Terror) left the USSR in a perilous state. When the Germans raced across the border in the summer of 1941 the Red Army, shorn of many experience leaders, suffered catastrophic losses.

Zhukov wrote in his postwar memoir, "Many thousands of outstanding party workers, members of the armed forces, faithful patriots of the motherland and talented leaders of the country were annihilated by the order of Stalin. Of course, one cannot forgive Stalin."

In 1938, Zhukov commanded the First Soviet Mongolian Army Group as encroachment by the adventurous Japanese military on the frontier of Manchuria escalated into full-scale war. Zhukov responded to the Japanese challenge with a brilliantly executed victory in the pivotal Battle of Khalkhin Gol in 1939. An initial frontal attack

against the Japanese was followed up by swift armoured flanking manoeuvres that encircled the entire Japanese Sixth Army and compelled their forces to retire. In the wake of this spectacular victory Zhukov was declared a Hero of the Soviet Union and promoted to general.

In his planning role, Zhukov was responsible for military preparedness during a turbulent time. He was obliged to prepare as best he could for the prospect of an invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis, heretofore the sworn enemy of the Marxist state. On the other hand, he would have been neglecting his duties without preparing a scenario for offensive action against Nazi Germany. Such was standard practice in military planning. For example, in 1930 U.S. authorities rubber stamped War Plan Red, which outlined how the U.S. would conduct a war against the British Empire.

In the autumn of 1940, therefore, Zhukov planned military exercises that would play out scenarios in the event of a German invasion. These war games were carried out on two occasions in January 1941, a month before Zhukov was promoted to chief of the general staff, and revealed the weaknesses of the Red Army defences. Considering it unlikely that the Germans



## “THERE IS A PEACE TREATY WITH GERMANY, BUT THIS IS ONLY A DECEPTION, OR ONLY A CURTAIN, BEHIND WHICH WE CAN OPENLY WORK”

could be stopped at the Soviet border, Zhukov developed plans that would absorb the initial shock of the invasion and then erode German fighting strength through successive echelons of defence in depth, accepted Soviet battle strategy for some time. His victory at Khalkhin Gol, however, had proven the value of assuming an offensive posture as soon as possible and demonstrated the advantage of swift advances.

Stalin remained hesitant to strengthen Red Army defences in the West, much less to supplement Soviet offensive capability. Repeated requests for more troops and tanks were delayed or denied, even though (as some historians relate) the Soviet strongman understood that the prospect of a Nazi invasion was real. A 5 May 1941 speech that Stalin made during a Kremlin banquet honouring graduates of the Frunze Military Academy was first thought to be a product of Nazi propaganda, but recent discovery of a preliminary text in Kremlin archives has given credence to Stalin's perspective despite an outward posture that he hoped to avoid war. Perhaps, then, his public position had merely been a play for time.

Just weeks before Operation Barbarossa was launched, Stalin told the gathering, “Our war plan is ready... We can begin the war with Germany within the next two months. There is a peace treaty with Germany, but this is only a deception, or only a curtain, behind which we can openly work... now we are strong; we must go from defence to attack. In fully defending our country, we are obliged to act offensively... The successes of the German Army are due to the fact that it has not encountered an equally strong opponent.”

Therefore, it is plausible that Stalin conducted an outwardly non-aggressive policy toward Nazi Germany while as unobtrusively as possible preparing for defence or even for a pre-emptive strike against Hitler. At the same time, the Germans were supposedly aware of a potential augmentation of Soviet forces along their new western border in occupied Poland; such a perception may, some believe, have prodded Hitler to launch Operation Barbarossa when he did.

Historians have been drawn to evidence of a Soviet offensive plan delivered to Stalin for consideration on 15 May 1941, just weeks before the catastrophe of Barbarossa. Authored principally by Zhukov, it was accompanied by his statement, “Considering that Germany is currently maintaining its army in a state of mobilization... it has the capacity of beating us to the punch in deployment and of launching a surprise attack. To prevent this, I consider it essential, above all, not to leave the initiative to the German command,



*Joseph Stalin laughs with German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop as Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov signs the non-aggression pact of 1939*

but to forestall the enemy in deployment and to attack the German army while it is still in deployment stage.” In a 1965 interview, Zhukov stated that Stalin did not approve the plan, even though repeated warnings had been received in the Kremlin that a German invasion was imminent. These dire predictions had come from the U.S., Britain and other sources, including Richard Sorge, the Soviet master spy in Tokyo.

Interestingly, as the apparent build-up of German forces was observed on the border, Stalin did approve some limited reinforcements. There are two schools of thought regarding the deployment of Soviet forces prior to Barbarossa. First, Stalin could have approved the pre-emptive strike against the Wehrmacht on the basis of available intelligence and ordered his forces into position to attack first only to have the Germans “beat him to the punch” as Zhukov had warned. However, such a scenario was unlikely.

It is more probable that Zhukov ordered a defensive posture after Stalin declined to endorse the 15 May plan. In fact, on 10 June 1941, just 12

days before the German offensive was unleashed, Zhukov received word that troops in the Kiev district had been ordered to forward positions. Zhukov ordered the movement cancelled with the admonition, “Such action could provoke the Germans into armed confrontation fraught with all sorts of consequences. Revoke this order immediately and report who, specifically, gave such an unauthorised order.”

The movement to defensive positions explains the positioning only in part. Soviet tactical doctrine also asserted that an immediate counteroffensive should be initiated if the Germans attacked first.

In 1974, a volume attributed to General Semen Pavlovich Ivanov, a senior Red Army officer, titled *The Initial Period of War*, related, “Since carrying out of the missions designated by the plan was to be executed in the form of a retaliatory strike after the strategic deployment of the main forces of the Red Army, in the first stage of the initial strategic operations the covering armies deployed in the border zone should, by active defence operations



*Soviet soldiers fire an anti-tank gun at onrushing German forces*



with the support of aviation and the tactical reserves, repel the enemy thrust and thereby provide for the concentration of all forces designed for making the retaliatory strike."

Further support for this tactical mindset is found in prevailing Soviet theory rooted in the 1920s. In response to an attack, senior Red Army commanders agreed that it was preferable to fight a decisive battle in enemy territory. Therefore, an immediate counteroffensive was required. Thus, the vulnerability of the Red Army on the eve of Barbarossa may have been caused by preparations for the retaliatory strike. As Zhukov confirmed, though, the overwhelming nature of Barbarossa, particularly in its opening hours, extinguished the possibility of an immediate Soviet counteroffensive. The Soviet high command was then left with the monumental task of slowing the Nazi juggernaut, replacing its grievous losses and then seizing the initiative in the Great Patriotic War. However, for Stalin, Zhukov, and the rest of the Red Army senior commanders, surviving the hour of crisis was the first order of business.





# THE STORM BREAKS

Hellbent on the evisceration of a nation he viewed as Germany's mortal foe, Hitler finally unleashed his forces upon the Soviets in the summer of 1941











# HELL LET LOOSE

WORDS: CHARLES GINGER

Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union was Hitler's greatest gamble of WWII and the bloody realisation of his most ambitious dreams



In the summer of 1940, with much of Europe crushed beneath the boot of a rampant Wehrmacht, Hitler had every reason to be euphoric. His pact with the Soviet Union, signed in August 1939, had held, enabling his forces to sweep through Poland before surging into Western Europe. By late June of 1940, only the British remained to stand against them, the narrow escape of over 300,000 troops from Dunkirk scarred into the national consciousness. And yet despite a torrent of victories that led Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel to label Hitler as "the greatest warlord in history", the Führer was not satisfied.

Britain's refusal to acknowledge Germany's triumph and submit to peace talks puzzled Hitler. After all, he had always been open about his desire for peace, going so far as to "appeal to reason" during his annual speech in the Reichstag on 19 July 1940. To Hitler's chagrin, Churchill and the British people remained resolute, leading Hitler to surmise that Britain was pinning its hopes on the Soviet Union. Hitler's delusions led him to reason that only the complete annihilation of the Soviets would force Britain to recognise that her cause was lost.

During a conference with his military commanders at his lair in Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, on 31 July 1940, Hitler outlined his most ambitious plans yet: Germany would invade the Soviet Union the following year. "The sooner Russia is crushed, the better," he explained. "If we were to start in May 1941, we would have five months to finish the job."

However, while there were strategic motives behind Hitler's determination to destroy the USSR, arguably the more pressing desires behind Hitler's greatest gamble were of an ideological nature. While the summer of 1940 may have witnessed the germination of an idea that would become Operation Barbarossa, a cataclysmic showdown with 'Judeo-Bolshevism' was something that Hitler had first mentioned while writing his book, *Mein Kampf*, in 1924/25.

When discussing the apparently pressing need for Germany to secure Lebensraum (living space) in order to ensure a future in which the nation would have ample space and resources, Hitler was characteristically blunt when outlining his intended targets. "If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her border states." Describing the Slavs of Russia as "an inferior race", Hitler warned that "the end of Jewish rule in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state".

Hitler viewed the fate of the human race as an endless struggle for resources in a finite space, one that would end, in his twisted view, in the eventual triumph of "inferior" races (namely the Jews) unless a "pure" race was willing to fight to prevent them. In his primal opinion, "Nature knows no boundaries. She places lifeforms on this globe and then sets them free in a play for power."

Believing that every evil on Earth could be placed at the feet of Jews, Hitler sought to tear down anything that he perceived as being a Jewish entity or system. Communism, he claimed, was one

such policy, and it was this distorted belief that led him to state that it was Germany's duty to defeat the nation that had given communism a home: the Soviet Union.

Unswerving in his confidence that Britain was already beaten and thereby would not present a second front, Hitler directed the German high command to begin planning the invasion. The operation was to be codenamed Barbarossa (it was originally slated as Fritz), in honour of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, a talented military commander.

Scheduled for 15 May 1941, the operation would see three army groups (North, Centre and South) pouring across the Polish-Soviet border under the respective leadership of Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Fedor von Bock and Gerd von Runstedt. Von Leeb's forces were tasked with taking the Baltics and Leningrad; Bock's men were to head first to Smolensk and then onto Moscow; and Runstedt was to race to secure the "breadbasket" of Ukraine and the oil-rich Caucasus. Certain of victory, Hitler boasted, "We only have to kick the door in and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down."

While Germany began to make the necessary preparations for Barbarossa, the target of its impending assault sat paralysed. In the wake of Stalin's ruthless purges in the late 1930s, which saw three quarters of the Red Army's leadership executed or imprisoned, the forces of the USSR were woefully short on both morale and efficiency. To compound its already significant problems, Stalin insisted on controlling the placement of his divisions, further hamstringing the Red Army.

*Left: A photograph from the propaganda magazine Signal showing a German soldier on the Eastern Front*

*Below: German soldiers attack a Soviet bunker with a Flammenwerfer, which was capable of spitting flames up to 25m*





# THE SHADOW OF EVIL

Barbarossa was not just a military operation, it was a race war: the Nazis planned to ethnically cleanse Russia

The Einsatzgruppen (SS death squads) tasked with following the Wehrmacht into the Soviet Union were ruthless in the execution of their primary task: murdering civilians. From Soviet commissars to Jews and Romani, millions of innocent people were shot, hanged or otherwise killed by the prowling SS commandos scouring the lands already scorched by the advancing German Army. The predominant method of execution involved lining victims (including women, children and the elderly) along the edge of pits they had been forced to dig themselves, then shooting them in the back of the head or neck.

One of the most famous examples of such a mass execution was the Babi Yar massacre of September 1941. Over two days German soldiers and Ukrainian police officers shot 33,771 people in a ravine north of Kiev, many of whom were forced to lie down on the corpses of those who had gone before them.

Aside from Poland, it was the Soviet nations (notably the Baltics) that witnessed the worst atrocities of the war. Estonia, just one of a group of countries that suffered the horrors of Hitler's genocidal war, lost almost 99 per cent of its Jewish population.

Within five months of the invasion of the Baltics, Einsatzgruppe A alone had slaughtered nearly 140,000 people. Yet such figures failed to satisfy Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, who in time decided that gassing "undesirables" would be a quicker and cleaner method. By the war's end, Himmler's charges had murdered approximately 1.5 million Jews along the Eastern Front and thousands of Romani.



Labouring under the false belief that Hitler could only attack the USSR once he had dealt with Britain, Stalin was sure that any invasion was at least a year away. His obstinate refusal to accept the threat massing on his borders was further emboldened in April 1941 when Stalin received a letter from Winston Churchill warning of the Germans' intentions. Instead of heeding the British Prime Minister, Stalin discarded Churchill's correspondence as an Allied attempt to provoke the Soviets into launching a pre-emptive strike against their German allies, thereby opening a new theatre and reducing the pressure on the Allied troops.

Although Stalin's suspicions about Churchill's true motives may be understandable, his dismissal of the warnings of another, closer source were nothing short of catastrophic. In May of 1941, Richard Sorge, a Soviet spy working in Japan, informed Moscow that Germany was indeed planning to attack, information that he had received from none other than Colonel Eugen Ott, the military attache at the German embassy in Tokyo.

Amazingly, even when Sorge provided a date of 20 June 1941 (just two days off the actual launch date of 22 June), Stalin remained implacable, the Soviet ruler insisting that Hitler was not "such an idiot" as to risk a war on two fronts. Less than a month after receiving Sorge's detailed report, Stalin would be proven spectacularly wrong.

A five-week delay due to Hitler's decision to invade Yugoslavia in May 1941 after its pro-Nazi government had been toppled meant Germany was not ready to unleash its eastern campaign until June. Barbarossa was to be a crusade of extermination, with the ruthless removal of the elites and mass starvation employed as a

method of subjugating Soviet cities. In fact, the German high command went so far as to devise a 'Hunger Plan' that would see food taken from the Soviet Union and given to German soldiers and citizens. (According to historian Timothy Snyder, approximately 4.2 million Soviet civilians were starved to death between 1941 and 1944.) No quarter was to be given.

At 3.15 a.m. on 22 June, thousands of Luftwaffe engines burst into life to signal the beginning of Barbarossa, the fleet sailing high over the German assault boats bobbing on the River Bug in anticipation. As the planes zeroed in on their targets (airfields lined with neat rows of stationary Soviet planes), thousands of German artillery pieces began to belch flames into the sky. Hitler was finally attacking the entity he loathed the most, and he'd gathered 3.8 million soldiers (including Romanians, Italians and Slovaks) for the job, well-trained men supported by approximately 600,000 vehicles, 3,000 tanks, 2,500 aircraft and over 500,000 horses.

As millions of troops raced into the USSR, their counterparts radioed their superiors demanding to know what to do. Such was the shock of the assault that many border guards were gunned down in their nightwear, their homes and families engulfed in the flames of the bombardment. Despite this, Stalin was still – inexplicably – wary of some Allied trick and ordered that nothing be done to provoke the Germans, clinging as he was to the idea that Hitler would not have dared to double-cross him.

In all their wildest dreams, the German commanders could never have dared to hope to find their adversaries so woefully off guard. Many of the Soviets' defensive positions lacked the weaponry needed to counter a concentrated





panzer attack, and they could not hope to rely on any aid from above; on the first day of the operation the Soviets lost approximately 1,800 planes to the Luftwaffe's 35.

Within two days of the start of the attack, many of the 49 German Panzer battalions selected for the invasion were 50 miles inside the USSR. By 28 June over 400,000 Soviet troops were encircled outside of Minsk as the Second Panzer Group, under the command of General Heinz Guderian, linked up with Hermann Hoth's Third Panzer Group.

To the north, General von Leeb was faring just as well, his troops hailed as emancipators by the violently suppressed peoples of the Baltics, many of them actively helping the Germans by attacking a number of Red Army positions. However, the invaders certainly didn't have it all their way.

Army Group South, charged with taking Kiev and then hurrying on to the priceless oil fields of the Caucasus, was finding the going difficult in the face of determined resistance. Rundstedt was doubly unfortunate as he was not only marching on the most heavily defended region of the

front lines, but his men were doing so as KV and T-34 tanks (the latter the best all-round tank of the entire war) rolled towards them. While the central and northern thrusts of the German Army continued to slice into Soviet territory, Rundstedt found himself increasingly bogged down. His failure to keep up with the rest would ultimately prove fatal for Hitler's hopes of a rapid victory. Yet as July approached, the overall picture from a German perspective seemed unexpectedly rosy.

Upon finally realising that Hitler had betrayed him, Stalin had fallen into a stupor of despair that lasted for over a week. Now, with machinery being evacuated from Ukraine, Stalin finally began to emerge from his trance, and on 3 July he addressed the Soviet people as his "comrades" as he called on them to "selflessly join our patriotic war of liberation against the fascist enslavers".

While the idea the Soviet people were fighting to defend a communist utopia that upheld their rights and shunned the violence so freely used by the Wehrmacht (especially the SS divisions attached to it) is laughable, Stalin was not exaggerating when he referred to the threat of

enslavement. From the outset of the war, Hitler had expressed his desire to carve Germany's new eastern territories into a series of states filled with Soviet slaves. A cruel and manipulative tyrant he may have been, but in his speech at the start of July Stalin was, for once, telling his people at least some of the truth.

On the same day that Stalin addressed the nation, German General Franz Halder, chief of staff of army high command, confided in his diary that it was "no overstatement to say that the Russian campaign has been won in the space of two weeks". In hindsight this statement reeks of hubris, but at the time German confidence was more than justified. By 13 July the German armies had advanced between 186 and 372 miles, incapacitated (either by killing, injuring or capturing) over 589,000 enemy soldiers and obliterated over 6,850 aircraft.

The Wehrmacht was edging ever closer to Moscow, and with every step the most stunning victory in German military history appeared to loom closer. Just as Hitler predicted, the world now held its breath.



*A seemingly endless supply of manpower enabled the USSR to keep on fighting*



*Vicious house-to-house fighting became a hallmark of the war*

*Soviet bombers soar over Moscow. Following horrendous losses in the early stages of the war, the Red Army Air Force gradually recovered and played a key role in offensive operations*





# HEAD TO HEAD

**"WE TERMINATE THE GERMAN DRIVE TO THE SOUTH AND WEST OF EUROPE AND DIRECT OUR GAZE TOWARDS THE EAST"  
- ADOLF HITLER**

## NUMBERS

The Axis invasion force consisted of three army groups totalling 3.8 million men fighting along an 1,800-mile front. Approximately 3.2 million of the troops were German, but there were also 300,000 Finns, 250,000 Romanians and 50,000 Slovakian soldiers.

## EQUIPMENT

Arguably the best machine gun in its class, the MG 34 was specifically designed for fluid infantry tactics, with a lighter belt feed and a tripod. The Walter P 38 was a simple yet robust sidearm, as was the Wehrmacht's standard rifle, the bolt-action Karabiner 98k.



## LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

The infantry were severely hampered by the Russian winter and short-sighted planning. Guns and the lubricant in engines froze while basic supplies became severely stretched. An inability to replace damaged vehicles saw over 625,000 horses put into the field.

## SURVIVABILITY

The Germans expected a short campaign and mostly fought in summer uniforms, so they lacked proper clothing during the winter when the temperature plunged to a record -41°C (-42°F). Consequently, by 1942, 113,000 Germans had been killed or incapacitated by frostbite.

# WEHRMACHT

**ALLEGIANCE:** Third Reich



**TROOPS:** 3.8 million



**TANKS:** 3,000



**PLANES:** 2,500



# RED ARMY

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union



**TROOPS:** 4.8 million



**TANKS:** 11,000



**PLANES:** 7,000-9,000

## NUMBERS

In June 1941, the Red Army could muster almost 5 million men in 303 divisions, but between June and December of the same year it was also able to field an extra 290 divisions from scratch and collected 1.25 million men to defend Moscow.

## EQUIPMENT

Many Soviet weapons were antiquated, including the standard-issue Mosin-Nagant Model rifle, which while reliable was first designed in the 19th century. The DP-28 light machine gun took a long time to change magazines, and even old-fashioned Maxim machine guns were still in use.

**“IF YOU HAVE NOT  
KILLED AT LEAST ONE  
GERMAN A DAY, YOU  
HAVE WASTED THAT DAY”  
– ILYA EHRENBURG**

## LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

Initially, many Soviet units were based in former Polish territories that were quickly overrun. They also lacked sufficient tanks and trucks with spare parts, which resulted in a logistical breakdown. However, an organised retreat and regrouping on home turf reset the Soviet war machine.

## SURVIVABILITY

The Soviets were better prepared for winter warfare than the Germans, with their uniforms consisting of fur clothes, coats and hats along with traditional thick woollen footwear called 'valenki'. They also had skis for travelling over ice.





# COMMANDERS OF BARBAROSSA

Meet some of the key military figures charged with securing victory in the brutal struggle for the East

## WALTHER VON BRAUCHITSCH

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1900–1941

**ALLEGIANCE:** Third Reich

Following his pivotal role during the Battle of France and the successful invasions of Greece and Yugoslavia, Hitler was quick to promote von Brauchitsch in July 1940. As the director of the Axis ground forces, he was central to Germany's early success prior to Moscow.

In June 1941, when Hitler ordered the systematic invasion of the Soviet Union, von Brauchitsch was one of a handful of high-ranking officials who assisted in refining the original plan and tactics.

His direction of the Axis ground forces helped Germany crush Soviet forces across the USSR, however, the failure to seize Moscow enraged Hitler, who placed part of the blame on von Brauchitsch's shoulders. The field marshal was promptly relieved of his duties. He would die in 1948.



## ALEKSANDR VASILEVSKY

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1915–1918, 1919–1959

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union

An experienced soldier in WWI and in the Russian Civil War, Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Vasilevsky famously worked alongside Georgy Zhukov in the Allied fight against the Axis in the latter years of the war, but he would still play a significant part in the 1941 invasion.

In August 1941, Vasilevsky was appointed Chief of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff



and Deputy Chief of the General Staff, positioning him as one of the most powerful military leaders in the Red Army. Two months later he was transferred to Moscow to help coordinate the defence of the city. He helped organise the three fronts of the city, a job that often kept him working until 4 a.m. each day. A bomb injured Vasilevsky in late October, but he continued to assist overseeing Moscow's defences up until the counteroffensive that drove the Germans away from the city's outskirts.

## GEORGY ZHUKOV

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1915–1917

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union

When Hitler greenlit the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Zhukov was one of the high-ranking Soviet commanders that signed the official military countermeasures to drive out the invaders and restore order to the fringes of the nation. The plan was to take a large force of Soviet armour and infantry and encircle the German force, but despite superior numbers the Soviets were routed by Axis troops.

In August 1941, prior to the Germans surrounding Kiev and besieging the city, Zhukov had advised Stalin to evacuate the city rather than risk the lives of its inhabitants. Stalin refused, and when the city fell over 500,000 men were taken into captivity.

The advice to withdraw from Kiev saw Stalin pull Zhukov from the opening months of the conflict, and he was forced to sit back and watch his nation slowly brought to its knees by a German hammer that crushed Soviet resistance at every encounter. By September, Hitler was directing most of his forces in Russia towards Moscow.



and Zhukov was soon sent back in the field to safeguard the city.

Zhukov's impact on the defences of the city was immediate. His decision to recall Soviet forces stationed in the Far East bolstered the resistance effort, with many hailing his tactical direction to get them to the city in record time as a key influence on the siege's eventual outcome. The German attempt to overrun the city was hampered by reinforcements pouring in, and at the end of the year Zhukov organised a counterattack that drove the Germans back.





## SEMYON BUDYONNY

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1903–1954

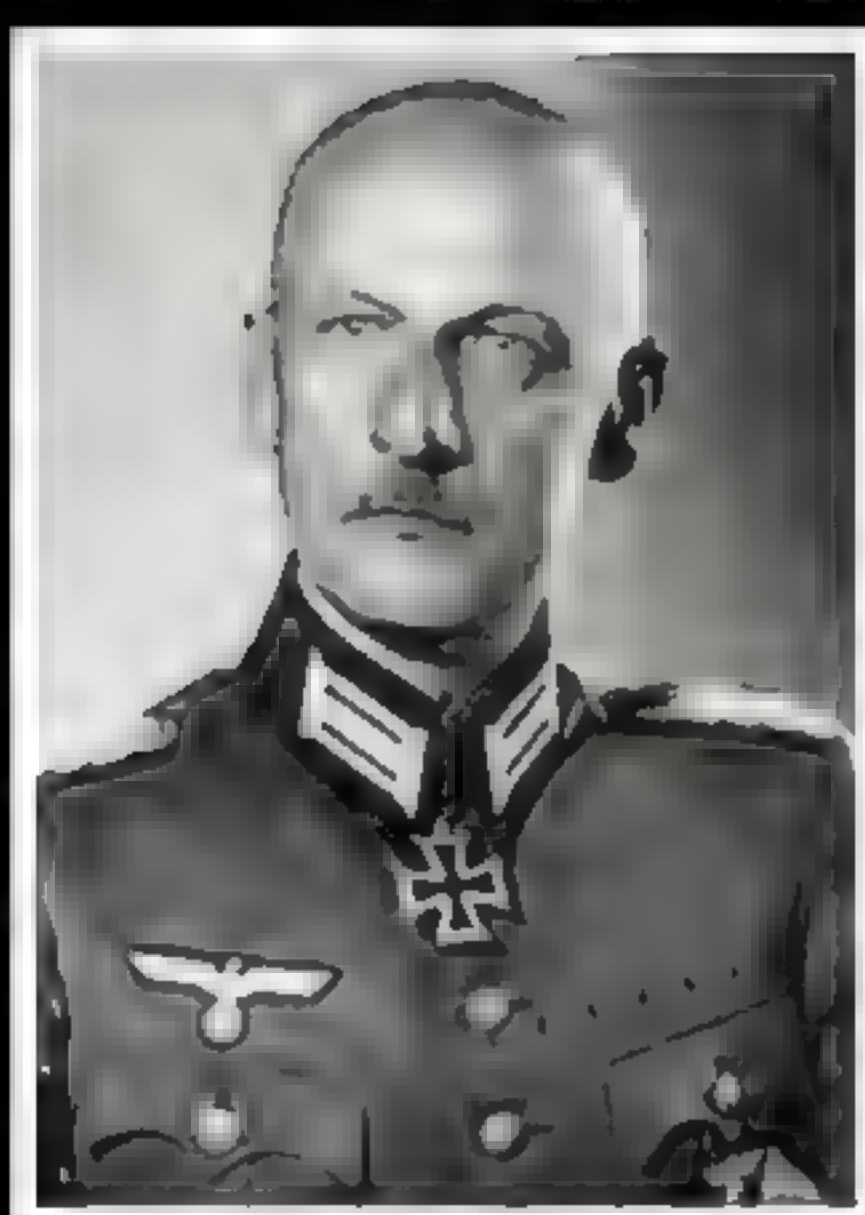
**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union

A red cossack, a cavalryman and close ally of Stalin, Semyon Mikhailovich Budyonny had already carved himself an illustrious career in the Red Army by the time Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union. As a passionate soldier, Budyonny had an infamous distaste for the tank and other symbols of modern military hardware, but he was well respected and was promoted to commander-in-chief of the southwestern direction in 1941.

However, the German advance was relentless in the opening months of the invasion, and

the Wehrmacht's tactic of total encirclement (surrounding a city from all sides and bombarding it into submission) led to the bloody battles of Uman and Kiev. When the region eventually fell, 650,000 to 850,000 Soviet soldiers were marched into brutal captivity.

It was an unmitigated disaster for the Soviets and Stalin was quick to blame Budyonny, but ultimately he would avoid any real punishment, remaining one of the USSR's most revered military figures until his death in 1973.



## WILHELM RITTER VON LEEB

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1895–1938; 1939–1942

**ALLEGIANCE:** Third Reich

In WWI, Wilhelm Josef Franz Ritter von Leeb had carved a respectable career in the German Army, receiving the Knight's Cross of the

Military Order of Max Joseph in 1916 in honour of his bravery. Von Leeb was famously involved in the dismantling of the Nazi Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, which gave a young Adolf Hitler his first public platform when he was put on trial.

As a result, von Leeb remained one of Hitler's least-favoured commanders when the Nazi Party assumed control of the country. He managed to

further alienate Hitler by daring to criticise some of the party's more extreme policies. As such, he was pensioned off in 1938, but he was soon recalled in 1939 when the Wehrmacht found itself in need of experienced officers.

As the commander of Army Group North, von Leeb regained Hitler's confidence with the swift manner in which his forces crushed the Soviets in the opening months of the invasion, eventually surrounding Leningrad entirely. Despite then directly ordering the advance to halt, Hitler soon began criticising von Leeb for a lack of decisiveness. Now utterly exasperated with his leader's interference, von Leeb requested he be relieved of command and Hitler complied.



## FEDOR VON BOCK

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1898–1945

**ALLEGIANCE:** Third Reich

Moritz Albrecht Franz Friedrich Fedor von Bock was a fiery commander who had earned the nickname 'Der Sterber' (the dying) due to his total devotion to the German Army. He believed that dying on the battlefield for the Fatherland was the highest honour.

Von Bock entered the German invasion of the Soviet Union as one of Hitler's most-favoured generals. He had a string of successful campaigns and battles under his belt and held enough influence to alter Hitler's invasion plans, opting for a more direct approach to take Moscow swiftly. In the first few months, however, Hitler and von Bock clashed when the Führer ignored the commander's request to ignore pockets of resistance and point the Axis forces at Moscow.

Von Bock was eventually given command of Operation Typhoon, the new plan to take Moscow, and his orders saw the Germans get within a few miles of taking the city. However, a mixture of terrible winter conditions and increasing Soviet resistance led to a retreat from Moscow in December 1941.

## KLIMENT VOROSHILOV

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1917–1941

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union

Another figure with a tumultuous relationship with Stalin, Voroshilov's prominent place among the Soviet Union's highest-ranking officials had been in doubt in the run up to the 1941 invasion. A member of the State Defence Committee, he had overseen Soviet participation in the Winter War, but a string of humiliating defeats had seen his continued presence brought into question.

When Germany began its grand invasion in 1941 he was given command of the Northwestern Direction, commanding several different fronts against the advancing Germans. By September 1941, he was one of the main commanders in control of the Leningrad defences and was commended on his personal bravery, leading a counterattack against the Germans with nothing more than a pistol to defend himself. However, his tactics were seen as archaic and ineffective against the onslaught of the Axis and he was soon replaced by Georgy Zhukov.





# THE BATTLE OF BIALYSTOK-MINSK

Staggered by the scale and speed of the Germans' early successes, many Soviets feared the war was over before it had barely begun

WORDS: STEVEN JENKINS

**F**ought in the summer of 1941, the Battle of Białystok-Minsk was the opening stage of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. On 22 June, under the experienced and watchful eye of Field Marshal Fedor von Bock – who had held army group commands in the invasions of Poland and France – Army Group Centre started the march to Minsk with the goal of encircling the 3rd, 4th, 10th and 13th Soviet armies. The city was a key strategic railway junction and a defensive position of the main road and rail communications with Moscow.

With the 4th and 9th Armies and 2nd and 3rd Panzer Group under his command, von Bock had around 750,000 troops, 1,938 tanks and 1,500 aircraft for the battle ahead. Facing von Bock and Army Group Centre was the Red Army's Western Front commanded by General Dmitry Pavlov. At his disposal he had just over 670,000 troops, 4,522 tanks, 14,171 guns/mortars and 2,100 aircraft.

## Marching into a trap

The 3rd Panzer Group attacked in the north, launching its offensive north of the Białystok salient and reaching the Neman River (also known as Niemen or Nemunas) in Belarus the very next day. The Soviets launched localised attacks to try and stop the offensive but with little success. By 24 June 1941 the leading elements of the 57th Panzer Corps (part of the 3rd Panzer Group) had already reached Vilnius, around 186 miles from Białystok and around 125 miles from Minsk.

The 2nd Panzer Group had launched their offensive from south of Białystok and had crossed the Bug River by 23 June penetrating 37 miles into Soviet territory. While the panzers were rapidly advancing in the north and south, the 9th Army and 4th Army cut into the salient to begin encircling Soviet armies around Białystok. On 23 June, the Soviet 10th Army attempted a



counterattack to prevent the encirclement but failed. The following day a counterattack towards Hrodna also failed with heavy losses, though some Soviet units managed to escape.

By the 25th the Germans had nearly closed the Białystok salient with the Soviet forces relying on a single road linking Białystok and Slonim as their only means of escape. It was becoming clear that the Soviet forces were going to be completely encircled and cut off from their compatriots.

On the evening of 25 June the XLVII Panzer Corps (part of the 2nd Panzer Group) cut between Slonim and Vawkavysk, east of Białystok, forcing General Pavlov to order the withdrawal of all troops in the salient behind the Shchara River at Slonim to avoid encirclement. The 3rd, 10th and 13th armies bravely continued the fight, but their fate was inevitable.

On 28 June, the 9th and 4th German armies linked up east of Białystok. This split the already flanked Soviet troops into two pockets. A smaller pocket contained the 10th Army, while a larger pocket that stretched to the western outskirts of Minsk ensnared the 3rd and 13th armies.

The next day the 2nd Panzer Group and the 3rd Panzer Group closed the pincer east of Minsk, only seven days after the operation had begun. The Soviets tried one last counterattack in a bid to break out of the encirclement, but their efforts failed, dooming them to annihilation.

The German forces surrounded and eventually destroyed or captured most of the Soviet 3rd,

10th and 13th armies and part of the 4th Army, in total about 20 divisions, while the remainder of the 4th Army fell back eastwards towards the Western Berezina river. The fighting finally ceased on 9 July.

## The aftermath of the battle

While the Germans took heavy casualties, especially when it came to mopping up operations, they were nothing like the losses suffered by the Soviets.

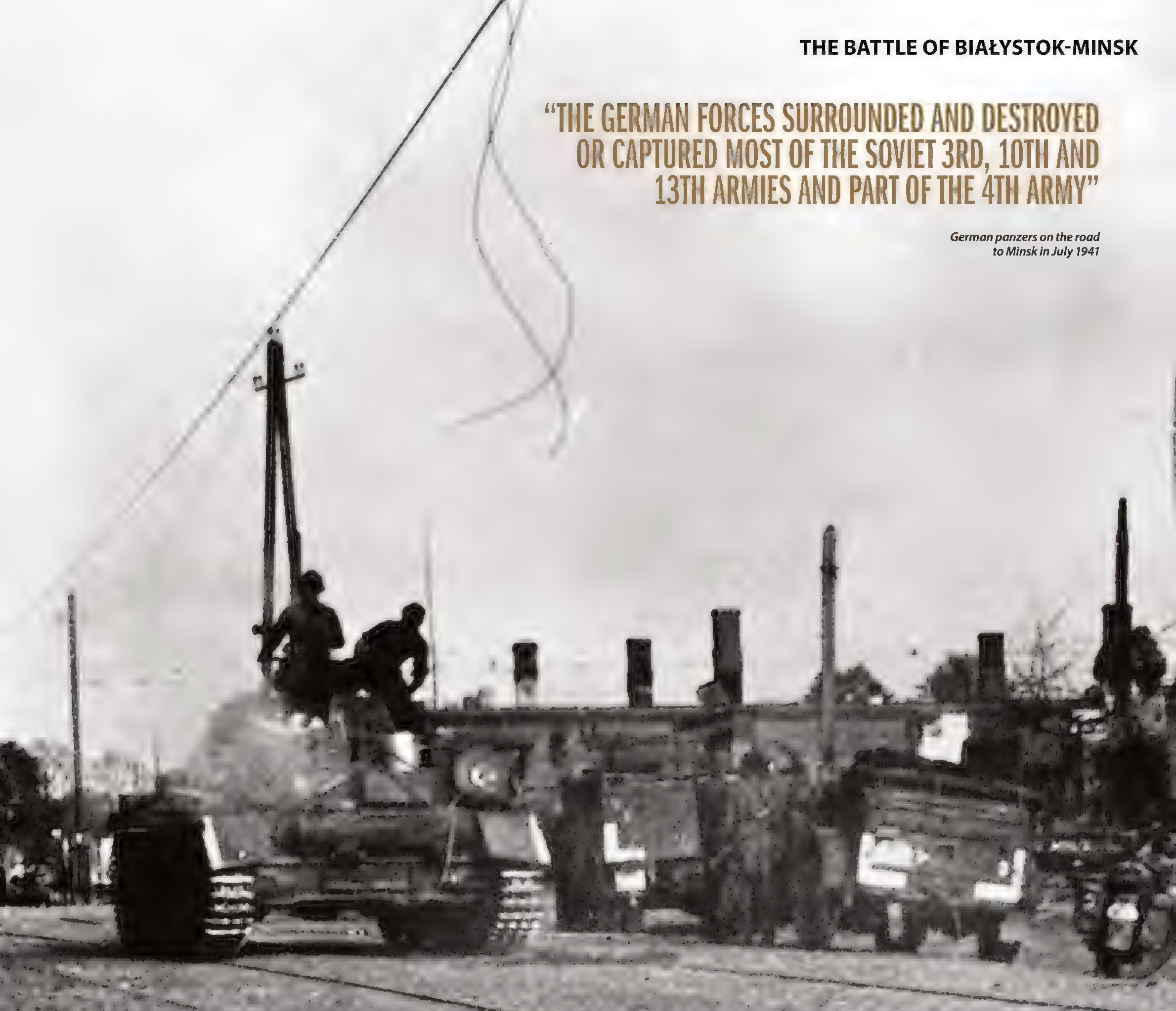
The German forces lost around 12,000 of the 750,000 troops who started the battle, 101 tanks and 276 aircraft. From a Soviet perspective the battle was a disaster, with over 341,000 troops, 4,522 of 4,799 aircraft, and almost 1,700 of 2,100 aircraft lost.

Ironically, the speed of their success would lay the groundwork for the Germans' demise. Destroying the Soviet Western Front in only 18 days and advancing 285 miles into the USSR imbued the Germans with an unwavering belief that the result of their invasion was a foregone conclusion and victory was only a matter of weeks away. Such hubris would prove to be a fatal misjudgement.



**"THE GERMAN FORCES SURROUNDED AND DESTROYED OR CAPTURED MOST OF THE SOVIET 3RD, 10TH AND 13TH ARMIES AND PART OF THE 4TH ARMY"**

*German panzers on the road to Minsk in July 1941*



*General von Bock (left) discusses battle plans with commanders of the 3rd Panzer Group*



*German armoured vehicles pass through the ruins of Minsk*





# THE BATTLE OF SMOLENSK

## HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

WORDS: STEVEN JENKINS

Reeling in the wake of several colossal defeats, the Soviets finally managed to make a stand against their rampant invaders

**F**resh from their success at the Battle of Białystok-Minsk, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock and Army Group Centre had their eyes on their next target on the march to Moscow – the town of Smolensk in Western Russia, just 250 miles from the capital. The plan was for the 2nd Panzer Group to cross the Dnieper River and attack from the south while the 3rd Panzer Group was to drive in from the north and join forces to encircle Smolensk.

After recent defeats, the Red Army was looking to reorganise itself and establish better defences against the onrushing Germans, and Smolensk was the chosen line in the sand. After the failures of General Dmitry Pavlov, Stalin transferred command to Field Marshal Semyon Timoshenko, who was given five armies from the strategic reserve to help strengthen the Soviet position in the battle to stop the Germans.

The 13th, 16th and 19th armies were deployed south and north of Smolensk. Elsewhere, the 20th Army was positioned on the Dvina-Dnieper land bridge between Orsha and Vitebsk, with the 21st Army further south on the Dnieper near Rogachev. The 22nd Army was deployed on the Dvina River bend north of Vitebsk, and the 24th Army was stationed west of Smolensk. This formed a long and winding front that would ultimately slow the Germans down enough to alter the course of Operation Barbarossa.

On 10 July 1941 the 2nd Panzer Group of Army Group Centre led by General Heinz Guderian launched its offensive on Smolensk with a surprise attack over the River Dnieper southwest of Smolensk. By 13 July they had overrun the 13th Army, passed the city of Mogilev, encircling several Soviet divisions as they did so, and were within 11 miles of Smolensk.



In the north the 3rd Panzer Group led by Commander Hermann Hoth lunged forwards, establishing a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Dvina River, thereby threatening Vitebsk. With both panzer groups driving East the 16th, 19th and 20th armies faced the prospect of encirclement west of Smolensk and tried to launch counteroffensives with little success. By 15 July the 29th Motorised Division, supported by the 17th Panzer Division, broke into Smolensk and captured large swathes of the city. The suburbs were a different prospect, however, with a week of house-to-house fighting needed to capture the remaining outskirts of Smolensk.

Guderian was under the impression that his 2nd Panzer Group would continue on its march

towards Moscow, and by 20 July his 10th Panzer Division had managed to establish a bridgehead on the east bank of the Desna River at Yelnya, southeast of Smolensk.

In the north, Hoth's 3rd Panzer Group was not as swift due to ground conditions, the weather and the Soviets looking to escape the encirclement, but by 18 July the 2nd and 3rd panzer groups were within ten miles of closing the gap.

However, the Soviets weren't beaten yet, and a hastily put together force mounted a fierce counterattack on 21 July, which helped to keep the gap open. Unfortunately for the Soviets poor coordination undermined their efforts and the Germans continued the encirclement. By 27 July they had linked up and closed the pocket



*The Battle of Smolensk claimed the lives of almost 30,000 Germans, while the Soviets suffered casualties (including those wounded or captured) numbering over 486,000*





## THE STORM BREAKS

east of Smolensk, trapping large portions of the 16th, 19th, and 20th armies. Even so, there was still work to do as some of the Soviets had managed to escape. Ultimately it mattered not; the encirclement was finally completed on 5 August.

On the same day that the Germans first linked up – 27 July – Bock, commander of Army Group Centre, was attending a conference in Novy Borisov in Belarus. Here he was to discover that the advancing German armies were to strictly follow Führer Directive 33. This was issued by Hitler on 19 July 1941, not long after the Battle of Smolensk had commenced, and stated that they were to join forces with Army Group North and Army Group South to concentrate on targets to the north and south of the front line. Under no circumstance were they to try to push further east as first thought. Moscow was no longer the primary objective. The generals in attendance were ordered to concentrate on finishing off any stray Soviet divisions while refurbishing equipment and restocking supplies. Hoth and Guderian were left frustrated and angry at the directions given.

It's believed that the conference at Novy Borisov was the point where the Wehrmacht leadership broke trust with Hitler. As soon as Guderian, Hoth and Bock returned to the front they conspired to delay the implementation of Directive 33, hoping that in time, with the help of other generals, they could persuade Hitler to rethink. Their hopes were soon dashed.

As expected, little could be done to change Hitler's mind. He stated that his generals knew "nothing about the economic aspects of war" and that Ukraine would "provide raw materials and agricultural produce Germany would need for a long war". He also went on to say that the occupation of the Crimea would "neutralise the threat from the Russian Air Force against the Ploesti oilfields". This led to a fragmented front line that saw the Germans pay dearly for every piece of Soviet soil, and while their losses in men and materiel were disastrous, the most precious thing they began to exhaust was time, something the Soviets capitalised on to strengthen their defences.

In his book *Barbarossa Derailed*, ex-US Army colonel and renowned military author David M. Glantz suggests that the Germans' change of plan and setbacks at Smolensk ultimately became the crucial turning point in Operation Barbarossa.

Despite incurring heavy losses, the Soviets continued to frustrate the German advance, slowing it significantly. This gave the Soviets the time they needed to plan and coordinate a number of counteroffensives to further diminish any lingering hopes among the invaders of a swift victory in the East, and it was at Yelnya that they finally struck back.

**"THE GENERALS IN ATTENDANCE WERE ORDERED TO FOCUS ON FINISHING OFF ANY STRAY SOVIET DIVISIONS"**



Feder von Bock,  
commander of Army  
Group Centre during the  
Battle of Smolensk



Huge parts of Smolensk  
lay in ruins after its fall



German infantrymen of an SS armoured division take a pause from battle



## The Yelnya offensive

Located 50 miles southeast of Smolensk, Yelnya was seen as a strategic springboard in the Germans' push towards Moscow. The 2nd Panzer Group of General Heinz Guderian took over the Yelnya salient on 19 July, but in the process they ran out of fuel and became dangerously low on ammunition. While Army Group Centre rested and waited to be supplied with the necessary equipment to continue, the Soviets saw an opportunity to strike back.

The first phase of the operation began at the end of the first week in August, but it was to prove a failure and was called off within 48 hours. The Soviets needed to rethink their approach, but they continued their offensive operation up until 20 August even so.

On 30 August Konstantin Rakutin's 24th Army began its offensive. The plan was to attack and create a double encirclement and then cut off any escape routes for the Germans. Just three days after the initial attack the Germans started to retreat from the salient as the Soviets threatened to trap them. After a week of heavy combat, Hitler permitted Army Group Centre's commander Fedor von Bock to evacuate the Yelnya bridgehead, and by 6 September Yelnya was back in Soviet hands. But the Soviets didn't stop there, continuing to fight on until they reached a new German defensive line on the 8th.

The Soviets claimed that the German forces had been destroyed on the salient, but in reality a large proportion of them had been able to escape and live to fight another day. Casualties were

heavy on both sides, with the German XX Army Corps losing over 23,000 men while the Soviets saw nearly 32,000 killed, wounded or missing.

The Yelnya offensive was the first serious defeat for the Germans during Operation Barbarossa, on the Nazi authorities couldn't allow the German people to view as a failure. On the other hand the Soviets saw it as a major success. Consequently both propaganda machines went into overdrive.

The Germans stated that the retreat was a planned withdrawal, but an unnamed German infantryman wrote at the time, "Officially it was called a 'planned withdrawal'. But to me it was so much bullshit. The next day, we heard on the radio, in the 'news from the front' about the 'successful front correction' in our Yelnya defensive lines and the enormous losses we inflicted on the enemy. But no single word was heard about a retreat, about the hopelessness of the situation, about the mental and emotional numbness of the German soldiers."

Conversely, the Soviets were so pleased with the fight back that for the first time they invited foreign correspondents in the Soviet Union to visit the front, including the Russian-born British war correspondent Alexander Werth.

"Here was not only, as it were, the first victory of the Red Army over the Germans; here was also the first piece of territory – perhaps only 100 to 150 square miles – in the whole of Europe reconquered from Hitler's Wehrmacht," he wrote.

Yelnya may have been a small success, but it was a critical one, a chink of light in a war that had plunged Europe into darkness.



German soldiers change road signs after their victory in Smolensk









## OBLITERATION

German troops pick over the burned-out vehicles and shattered bodies of a Soviet column that was unfortunate enough to be intercepted by Stuka dive bombers. Also known as the Junkers Ju 87, this lethal aircraft played a pivotal role on the Eastern Front. Barbarossa launched with four dive bomber wings, and the skilled pilots of the Luftwaffe almost completely destroyed the Soviet Air Force in just a few days. In fact the Stuka was so effective that on a single day 18 trains and around 500 Soviet vehicles were wrecked. Stukas proved to be the bane of many Soviet soldiers as they were repeatedly deployed to strafe Soviet supply lines and armoured vehicles and





# THE DRIVE TO KIEV

Falling back in the face of a relentless onslaught, the Soviet's stumbled from one disaster to another, and none was greater than the First Battle of Kiev

WORDS: STEVEN JENKINS

**W**hat would come to be recognised as the largest encirclement in the history of warfare came about as the result of the staggering

German gains made in the first few weeks of Operation Barbarossa. The rapid success of Feder von Bock's Army Group Centre along the middle of the Eastern Front created huge salient to the south of Kiev by the end of July 1941. This bulge presented the Axis forces with an irresistible opportunity to trap thousands of enemy troops and inflict further losses on a reeling Red Army.

Earlier in the month the Germans had managed to break through the Stalin Line, a string of fortifications running along the 1939 western border of the Soviet Union, and by 11 July they had reached the Irpin River, 12 miles southwest of Kiev.

With the outskirts of the city so close the Germans made their first attempt at taking the prize before them. However, they did not initially make the progress they had expected, being kept at bay by troops occupying the KUR (Kiev ukrep-

raion, or 'fortified district'), which bristled with several manmade obstacles. They were further impeded by a counteroffensive from the Soviet 5th and 6th armies.

With the advance to Kiev hitting a standstill, the Germans shifted their focus of attack to the Korosten district around 100 miles northwest of the city. This was a sticking point for the Germans in their advance as it was where the Soviet 5th Army was concentrated, but it wasn't the only area where the Germans experienced a setback. The substantial Soviet 26th Army was positioned in the salient around Kiev, putting the Germans on the back foot and slowing down any advance. In the end, a breakthrough would come in large part thanks to events unfolding elsewhere.

Towards the end of July the Soviet Southwestern Front was weakened as units were called to other parts of the theatre. It was then further undermined by the loss of tanks and capture of troops at the Battle of Uman, which was raging 125 miles south of Kiev. Here, the Germans encircled the Soviets, with 102,000 men taken prisoner.

Confronted by a diminished enemy, the Germans continued their drive towards Kiev, but on 7 August their advance was once again halted. Determined to make the invaders pay for every inch of soil, the Soviet 5th and 26th armies (ably assisted by the 37th Army and the Pinsk Flotilla, an inland branch of the Polish Navy) were proving stubborn adversaries. Their cause was boosted by the efforts of the local population, who worked to dig anti-tank ditches and fashion other obstacles, including 750 pillboxes and 100,000 mines planted along the 28-mile front. Around 35,000 locals also signed up to fight to save the city.

On 12 August a supplement to Directive 34 was issued representing a compromise between Hitler and Franz Halder, Feder von Bock and Heinz Guderian. The generals wanted to advance on Moscow as soon as possible, but Hitler wasn't convinced. He wanted to clear the salient occupied by Soviet forces on the right flank of Army Group Centre before pressing on.

The compromise meant time out and redeployment for the 2nd and 3rd panzer groups



*A German soldier guards captured Soviet prisoners*



*Soviet POWs cover a mass grave after the Babi Yar massacre*



*Germans soldiers attack a Soviet village west of Kiev*



*German soldiers march towards Kiev*



of Army Group Centre, who would rejoin the thrust towards Moscow after they had achieved their objective. Happy with the compromise, the generals were soon to learn that their objectives were never going to be achievable. On 15 August, Hitler abandoned any notion that Army Group Centre was going to continue to Moscow.

On 18 August Walther von Brauchitsch, commander-in-chief of the army, pleaded with Hitler to refocus his forces on the Soviet capital. He pointed out that the onset of winter in Moscow would arrive around five weeks before winter in the Ukraine. This meant that the Axis armies had a window in which to seize the city before releasing troops for the fight in the south. Unyielding as ever, Hitler rejected the proposal, believing the most important objective was to deprive the Soviets of their industry. On 21 August a new directive was issued pointing out that Moscow was no longer a primary objective. The key aim was to continue the drive into the industrial heartlands of the USSR.

A large part of the 2nd Panzer Group and the 2nd Army of Army Group Centre were duly sent

south to help capture Kiev. Its mission was to encircle the Southwestern Front with the help of the 1st Panzer Group of Army Group South, who were advancing from a southeasterly direction. By 22 August the Germans had crossed the Dnieper River. Kiev was now under threat of encirclement.

It was now the turn of a frustrated Heinz Guderian to attempt to convince the Führer to unleash his men on Moscow before the snows began to fall. He too failed in his efforts and was informed by Hitler that Kiev and the destruction of the Soviet 5th Army were the priorities.

The Soviet commander of the Southwestern Front, Semyon Budyonny, could see what was happening and made a request to Stavka (the high command of the Soviet armed forces) to withdraw all troops beyond the Dnieper River, with only the 37th Army to stay in Kiev. His request was granted, but time was not on their side.

The German panzers were making rapid progress in the battle to capture Kiev, and on 12 September the 1st Panzer Group led by Ewald von Kleist had crossed the Dnieper and headed

northwards from Cherkassy and Kremenchuk around 125 miles from Kiev. A few days later, Guderian, travelling with the 3rd Panzer Division at the head of the 2nd Panzer Group, met up with Kleist's 1st Panzer Group near the school in Lokhvista, around 125 miles east of Kiev.

The 5th, 21st, 26th and 37th Soviet armies were now trapped and the Southwestern Front was falling apart. Semyon Timoshenko had replaced Semyon Budyonny, and, in one of many examples of poor communication between Soviet lines, he was instructed to keep the corridor open to the east: no small feat given that the corridor had long since collapsed.

Two days later Stavka authorised the abandonment of Kiev. During the night the Soviets were ordered to fight their way out of the cauldron, but the 37th Army defending the city never received the order. Effectively, the Southwestern Front now only existed in name.

As the Germans poured forwards they slowly squeezed the pockets of Soviet resistance. A few Soviets did manage to escape, with small groups



## THE STORM BREAKS

*A captured Soviet unit is  
ordered into a shed for  
interrogation in Kiev,  
September 1941*





arriving from the east. General Kuznetsov, commanding the 21st Army, managed to escape with 500 troops, while brigade commander Borisov broke out with 4,000 cavalymen. But these men were the exception. All told, approximately 450,000 Soviet troops were lost, along with thousands of guns and over 400 tanks. The Southwestern Front lay in ruins.

### Babi Yar

The Germans finally captured and occupied Kiev on 19 September 1941, but as the Soviets fled they littered the ground with mines. A series of explosions across the city led to the destruction of buildings – including Rear Headquarters Army Group South – leading to the deaths of German soldiers, officials and local civilians. Blamed on the native Jewish population, the Nazi occupiers had the perfect excuse to retaliate. On 26 September, the military governor for the region, Kurt Eberhard, met with SS leaders to concoct a plan to exterminate any Jews remaining in the city.

Over the following few days notices were posted (in Russian and Ukrainian along with a German translation) ordering all Jews to assemble for supposed resettlement: "On Monday, September 29, you are to appear by 7:00am with your possessions, money, documents, valuables

and warm clothing at Dorogozhitshaya Street, next to the Jewish cemetery. Failure to appear is punishable by death."

According to Raisa Maistrenko, who was three at the time and one of only 29 known survivors, "All the Jews decided to go because they thought they would be evacuated by train as the railway station was nearby. Nobody could possibly assume there would be a mass execution."

Between 29 and 30 September the Einsatzkommando murdered 33,771 Jews. One witness described the horrors.

"I watched what happened when the Jews – men, women and children – arrived. The Ukrainians led them past a number of different places where one after another they had to remove their luggage, then their coats, shoes, and overgarments and also underwear...

"Once undressed, the Jews were led into the ravine, which was about 150 metres long and 30 metres wide and a good 15 metres deep... When they reached the bottom they were seized by members of the Schutzpolizei and made to lie down on top of Jews who had already been shot... The corpses were literally in layers."

This was just the beginning. Babi Yar continued to be used for mass executions until the Red Army liberated Kiev on 6 November 1943.





# THE NAZI WAR MACHINE

## Inside the Panzer II that stormed the Eastern Front

**W**ith the end of WWI came the Treaty of Versailles. Among many things limiting Germany were restrictions to its military rights, preventing it from producing armoured vehicles except for a few designated for security. To get around this, the German military ordered the Panzer II be produced under the designation Landwirtschaftlicher Schlepper 100, meaning that it was developed under the guise of being a farm tractor. This was common practice for Germany and ensured that it wasn't in short supply of armour when war broke out.

### 7.92MM COAXIAL MASCHINENGEWEHR

Also known by the designation MG 34, the 7.92mm (0.3in) machine gun fitted to the Panzer II was an effective anti-infantry weapon and also saw service as a support weapon among Wehrmacht platoons.

### 20MM MAIN GUN

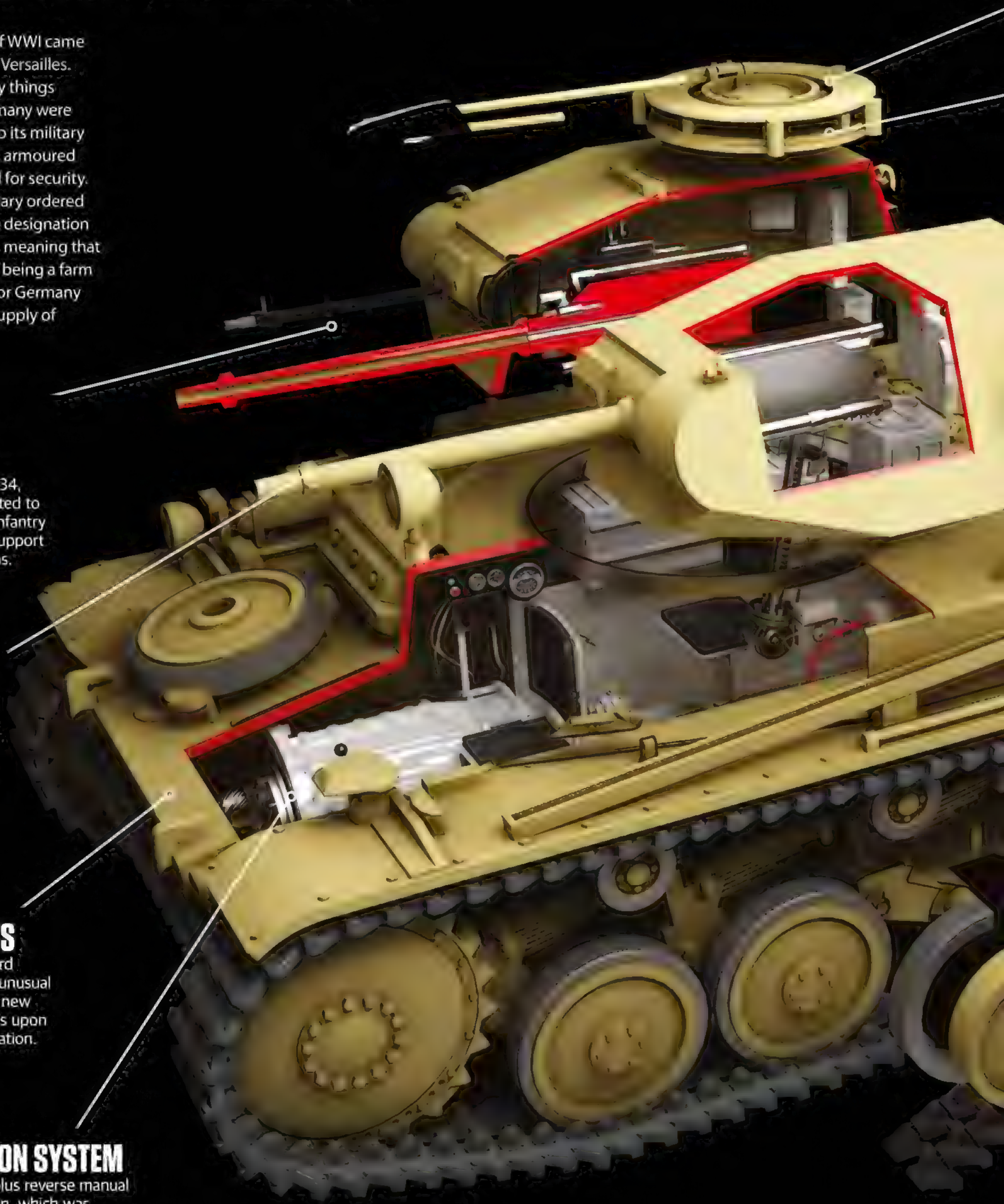
Produced in Germany in the mid-to-late 1930s, the 2cm (0.8in) KwK 30 L/55 was based on a 20mm (0.8in) flak cannon and was fully automatic, requiring the operator to fire in controlled bursts.

### THE FRONTAL GLACIS

These only sported the standard amount of armour, which was unusual for a tank, but later received a new single-piece 30mm (1.2in) glacis upon reaching its final Ausf F designation.

### MANUAL TRANSMISSION SYSTEM

The Panzer II sported a six-speed plus reverse manual gearbox made by ZF Friedrichshafen, which was generally considered to be reliable. Reversing was particularly handy for these little tanks.





## HAND-CRANKED TURRET

The turret on the Panzer II was actually operated by the tank's commander rather than a specific gunner, as the limited space inside the machine only allowed for three crew members.

## VISION PORTS

These were plentiful on the Panzer II and absolutely essential in both offensive and defensive capacities. A Panzer II commander would operate the turret and so would need a secondary choice of viewport from his turret optics.

## HOMOGENOUS STEEL ARMOUR

Early Panzer IIs came with only 14mm (0.6in) of armour on the front, sides and back. This was later increased to 30mm (1.2in) and then to 35mm (1.4in) but was still largely useless against anti-tank weaponry.

## SIX-CYLINDER MAYBACH PETROL ENGINE

The Maybach HL 45 was a six-cylinder petrol engine that saw service in several German vehicles during WWII. It was designed to provide the Panzer II with speed without the need to sacrifice mobility.

## TRACK RETURN ROLLERS

The upper part of the continuous track was supported by three return rollers, which were later increased to four on subsequent models of the Panzer II for added stability.

## RUBBER TYRE ROAD WHEELS

Five of these wheels helped propel the tracks, in turn driving the vehicle forwards. Later models introduced a torsion bar suspension system for the wheels, whereas early models favoured leaf-type springs.

## MORE KEY WEAPONS

### ► JUNKERS JU-87

When four Luftwaffe air fleets attacked on 22 June 1941, the Soviet Air Force was decimated before Operation Barbarossa had even gotten into full swing. Germany began the invasion with 2,500 aircraft, and afterwards its Stuka dive bombers had a clear run at the enemy.



### ► SIG-33 ARTILLERY

Having learned the strengths and weaknesses of Blitzkrieg during the invasion of Poland, the Germans realised that their SIG 33 howitzer was too slow to keep up with their tanks. Mounting the gun on a tank chassis for a Panzer I made it a much more mobile and effective weapon.



### ► PANZER 35(t)

Inherited from Czechoslovakia after Germany's invasion and occupation, the Panzer 35(t) served in the invasion of Poland and France. While praised for its strength and adaptability, it was no match for the Soviet T-34 and once spare parts ran out it was no longer used.



### ► T-34

Surprising the Nazis with its advanced armour and track design, the Soviet T-34 remains one of the best tanks ever made. However, the state of the Red Army and the shock Nazi assault meant that while it was pivotal in defending the USSR, it couldn't stop the initial charge.



### ► B-4 HOWITZER

Dubbed 'Stalin's Sledgehammer' by the Germans, the 203mm (8in) B-4 didn't come into its own until long after Barbarossa began. They could not be deployed fast enough and many were captured. They did help to turn the tide, however.



### ► PTRD-41 ANTI-TANK RIFLE

Manufactured in rapid response to the German invasion, the PTRD-41 compared favourably with German equivalents. Around two metres long and weighing 37lb, these guns were essential in slowing down Germany's armoured divisions.





# CITY UNDER SIEGE: LENINGRAD

It was the Soviet Union's second city and Tsarist Russia's glorious former capital, and Hitler hated it as the birthplace of Bolshevism. From 1941 he surrounded it, bombarded it and starved it in one of the longest and bloodiest sieges in history...

WORDS: JON TRIGG





Armed civilian volunteers from Leningrad's famous Kirov factory march to the front as the Germans approach



Leningrad's citizens – most of them women – use shovels and picks to construct defences before the Germans attack



German shells land on the Nevsky Prospekt, killing civilians indiscriminately

**O**n 22 June 1941, Sepp de Giampietro was waiting in the darkness of an east Prussian forest: "We checked our weapons and ammunition, one last warm meal was being dished out... we ate it without really tasting it, our throats were so tight... then all of a sudden fire erupted everywhere... the clock read 0305hrs." Barbarossa – the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union – had begun.

In the south the Germans aimed to capture Ukraine – the breadbasket of the Soviet Union – while in the centre the targets were Belarus and then Moscow, and it was Army Group North's objective to take Leningrad. The man tasked with capturing the city was a devout Bavarian Catholic, Wilhelm von Leeb, and to do it he commanded

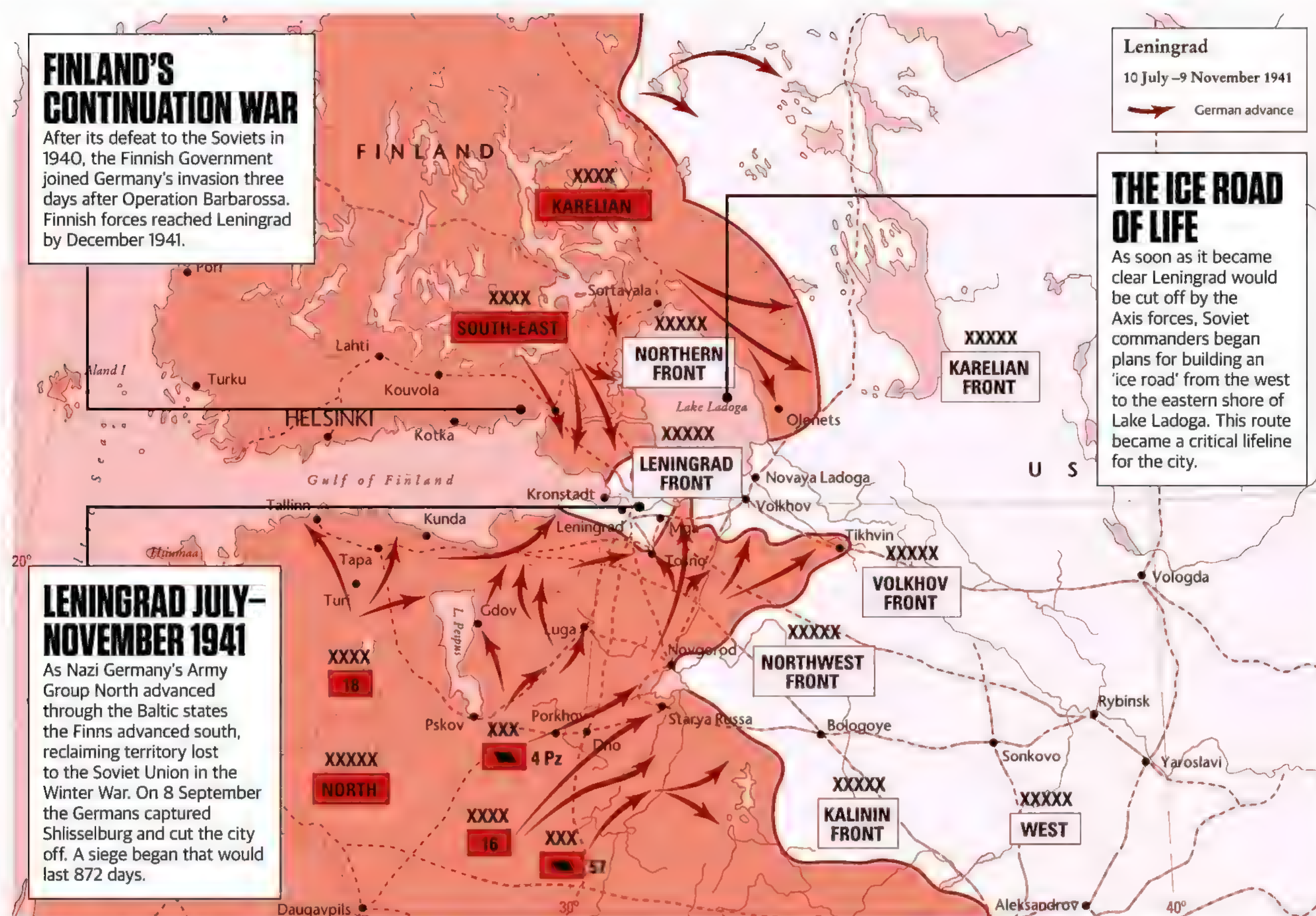
**"AFTER THE DEFEAT OF SOVIET RUSSIA THERE WILL NOT BE THE SLIGHTEST REASON FOR THE FUTURE EXISTENCE OF THIS LARGE CITY"**

the infantrymen of 16th and 18th armies and the panzers of Erich Hoepner's Panzer Group 4. Charging forward at breathtaking pace, the panzers surged through the Soviet-occupied Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. They were helped at every turn by de Giampietro and his fellow Brandenburg commandos, who would

don Red Army uniforms to hoodwink the Soviets and seize key bridges intact for the armour to drive over. In a little over a fortnight the Germans had breached the Stalin Line fortifications at Pskov, and a week later they vaulted over the River Luga to establish a bridgehead. Astonishingly, the Germans had advanced nearly 620 miles since the start of the invasion, and the city of Leningrad was now just 60 miles away.

With panic in the air the Soviet authorities acted. Over 500,000 of Leningrad's almost 4 million civilian inhabitants – men, women and children – were marched out of the city to build defensive rings around it. In an astonishing feat of mass labour they dug nearly 620 miles of earthworks and 400 miles of anti-tank ditches, laid almost as much barbed wire and built 5,000 pillboxes.





On Monday 8 September the Germans captured Shlisselburg, meaning Leningrad was now cut off. With the panzers diverted south to support the drive on Moscow, Dr. Werner Koeppen – a top Nazi official – wrote that “Leningrad is to be shut in, shot to pieces, and starved out.” That same Monday, the Luftwaffe bombed the warehouse district of Badaev, destroying the city’s food reserves, sending moulten sugar pouring into the river.

Three days later General Georgy Zhukov flew into the city to take charge, and the surrounding Germans began to build a warren of trenches, bunkers and observation posts as they settled down to a siege in WWI conditions. Inside the city Vera Inber tried to use her phone only for the operator to tell her, "The telephone is disconnected until the end of the war." At the same time the daily bread ration was reduced to 500 grams a day for factory workers, 300 for office staff and 250 for dependents. Elena Skryabina, a young mother, confided to her diary that, "Life had been reduced to one thing – the hunt for food."

The shelling began in earnest on 17 September with an opening barrage that lasted 18 hours and 33 minutes. From then onwards it settled into a routine: 8 a.m. to 9 a.m., then 11 a.m. to 12 noon, then from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m., and from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. A German POW later testified at the Nuremberg tribunal, "This way the shelling would kill as many people as possible." The Luftwaffe





## LENINGRAD UNDER BOMBARDMENT

With the city under siege the Germans began a systematic artillery and aerial bombardment designed to destroy all sources of clean water, foodstuffs and power in Leningrad, as well as kill as many people as possible. Over a million of the city's inhabitants died in the siege, but Leningrad did not surrender.

## Leningrad

1942-43



Areas of major damage from air and artillery bombardment



Internal defence

## NKVD HQ

During the siege, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) arrested and punished alleged deserters, collaborators and other perceived criminals. They were also responsible for pressing civilians into service in defence of the city.

St. Peter and  
St. Paul Fortress

NKVD  
headquarters

Army  
headquarters

## HEART OF INDUSTRY

The Kirov Works was a major military factory in Leningrad, producing T-34 tanks. Much of the equipment was evacuated prior to the siege, precariously transported east across the Lake Ladoga ice road.

Hermitage

Smolny  
Institute

Moscow  
Station

Vitebsk  
Station

River Neva

Fontanka Canal

Gulf of  
Finland

Kirov

Kirov  
flour mill

## ANTI-TANK DEFENCES

After the German threat to the city became realised, thousands of civilians were enlisted to dig earthworks and anti-tank ditches. Around 5,000 pillboxes were also built, making a direct assault on the city almost impossible.



took a hand as well with frequent bombing raids. One such attack wrecked 74 Marat Street. "Vera Potekhina was found under the wreckage," said a witness. "Screaming for help and her father – [who was] at the scene with the rescue team – [they] began frantically pulling away the debris... but when the last timbers were pulled away, the girl had died."

Hitler, reconciled to a siege, issued a general order on 22 September stating, "After the defeat of Soviet Russia there will not be the slightest reason for the future existence of this large city," and that through blockade and bombardment it'd be "razed to the ground".

Winter began to set in and the thermometer plummeted to -30°C (-22°F), as Stephan Kuznetsov recorded on 2 November, "The temperature is really dropping now and hunger is a constant presence among us."

By then the city's centrally baked bread contained cottonseed oil cake previously used as cattle feed, mouldy grain retrieved from a ship sunk in Lake Ladoga and floor sweepings. Elena Kochina described how "the bread was now sticky and damp". With so little food available, people had to improvise. The city's dogs and cats soon all went into the pot, to be followed by joiner's glue scraped from furniture as it was derived from animal proteins.

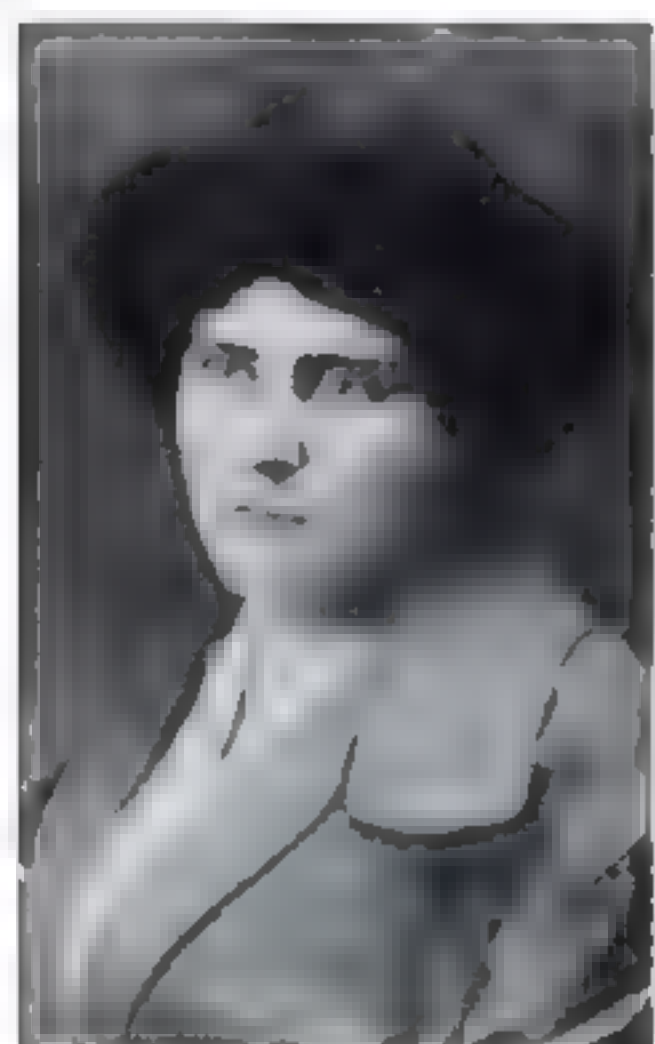
Faina Prusova remembered that "on the advice of one elderly woman I boiled the wallpaper... then I tried boiling a leather belt". By then the daily bread ration had dropped to half what it had been in September.

As the snow on the ground thickened heading towards Christmas, the meagre bread ration was cut once again, this time to just 250 grams for factory workers and 125 grams for everyone else – the equivalent of just three slices of a medium-sized loaf. A lecture given at the time described how "the outward manifestation of starvation is seen in swelling... the skin is dry, deprived of sweat and fat; the specific facial expression is apathy".

By January of the new year 17-year-old Vasily Vladimirov was writing in his diary that "The death toll has reached 20,000 a day. Everywhere in the streets you see people carrying dead bodies."

Life inside the besieged city became primal, with one inhabitant stating, "Some seek to save their lives at any price: they steal ration cards, tear bread out of the hands of passers-by... they roam the streets, mad from hunger and the fear of death."

*(Left to right) Leningrader S.I. Petrova in May 1941, May 1942 and October 1942 as she almost starved to death*



# CANNIBALS OF LENINGRAD

*In the most desperate times of the long siege, people were driven to unthinkable acts in order to survive*

Alone in her home, 12-year-old Tanya Savicheva scrawled in her diary the words, "The Savichevs are dead. Everyone is dead. Only Tanya is left." The notebook, in blue pencil filled with misspellings, lists each of her family members who she had seen die of starvation.

First her older sister Zhenya died, then her grandmother Yevdokiya and her brother Leka, followed by her two uncles, and finally, "Mama on May 13th at 7:30 in the morning, 1942." Tanya was alone, abandoned in a city that had been entirely cut off from the outside world. But she was not alone in writing a diary. Across the city, hundreds of people were chronicling the horrors of one of the deadliest sieges in history – the extent of which would not be revealed until decades later.

In spring 1942, outside Tanya's home, the streets were strewn with more victims who had perished as a result of Hitler's determination to starve her city to death. His chilling directive had come on 22 September 1941: "St Petersburg must be erased from the face of the Earth. We have no interest in saving the lives of the civilian population." Nearly a third of the inhabitants would starve to death over the next 872 days.

The 3 million people trapped in the city were left to survive on almost nothing – just 125 grams of dense sticky black bread made from a mixture of rye and oatmeal, kerosene and unfiltered malt. But the bitter-tasting bread offered little nutritional value and did nothing to stop the hunger pains.

Unprepared for the siege, it had taken just 12 weeks for German and Finnish forces to surround the city, destroying hospitals, food stores, roads, schools, power plants and water supplies. Leningraders were forced to forage for anything they could that might offer more life-sustaining calories than the rationed bread alone. People started to eat anything they could stomach: leather belts boiled into jelly, the scrapings from the back of wallpaper, fur coats. Elena Skryabina, a teacher of Russian literature, described in her diary on 3 October 1941, "I visited a lady I know, and she let me try one of her culinary inventions – a jelly made from leather belts. The recipe is: cook belts made from pig leather and prepare a sort of aspic out of it. This nastiness beggars description! A sort of a yellowish colour and a horrible smell. Despite my extreme hunger, I couldn't bring myself to swallow even a spoonful, and gagged."

The city became rife with outbreaks of disease and the increasingly gaunt populace was about to face a gruelling winter that would torment the already weakened city.





People queue to draw water from a hole in the ice during the first winter of the siege



As the temperature dropped below  $-32^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-26^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), people started burning everything they could find to heat their homes, starting with the furniture, then the cherished family books. But some precious notebooks were kept as writing had become an important way of coping for many of the people confined to the city.

As the hunger became more and more intolerable, it wasn't long before birds, rats, and stray dogs and cats started disappearing from the streets. And when this precious resource ran out, Leningraders traded beloved pets with their neighbours so they were not forced to kill and eat their own beloved animals. At this point, people started to display the unmistakable symptoms of extreme starvation.

"[They're] horrible, only skeletons, not people," wrote factory worker Ivan Savinkov in his diary. Klavdiya Naumovna, a doctor at a Leningrad hospital, had similar sentiments in his diary, writing, "These aren't people, rather skeletons with dry skin of a horrible colour stretched over them. Their consciousness is muddled, there's a kind of dullness and doltishness about them."

"They lack strength completely. Today I saw a patient like that; he walked to the hospital by himself, but died two hours later."

Bodies piled in the open and corpses were dragged through the streets on sleds to be buried in mass graves. It's no wonder that between the hunger and the heavy artillery bombardment that tensions started to rise, first between neighbours and then between families as people were killed for ration cards and others started secretly keeping dead loved ones to claim their rations.

These rising tensions didn't go unremarked by the people of the starving city. Arkadii Lepkovich noticed the blockade breaking apart his marriage as he and his wife grew suspicious of one another.

"Even relations between mother and child, husband and wife, have been made completely inhuman," he wrote. "The whole city has become this way because the battle for life has brought despair to every living individual."

People were going to increasing lengths to find a way to feed themselves and their families. They became paranoid of one another as rumours began to spread that others were dining on much worse than their beloved pets. Children started disappearing, bodies went missing from the cemetery, corpses on the streets had parts missing. On 13 December 1941, the people's fears were confirmed when the NKVD, Stalin's notorious secret police, filed the first report of the consumption of human flesh. Over the period of the siege 1,207 individuals were convicted for cannibalism.

One account from survivor Galina Yakovleva recalls a strange warm smell coming from a room, a smell that emanated from the flesh of a corpse prepared for food: "In the twilight, there were huge chunks of meat hung from hooks to the ceiling. And one piece was a human hand with long fingers and blue veins."

The perpetrators of cannibalism in starving Leningrad had not been criminals – only 18 people had previous convictions. Instead, they were people driven to such crimes by starvation and madness, driven by the will to survive and to save their families. The vast majority of those who resorted to cannibalism were unsupported women with young children who were eating corpses. However, the NKVD reports do detail some grisly occasions where Leningraders killed others in the pursuit of a meal.

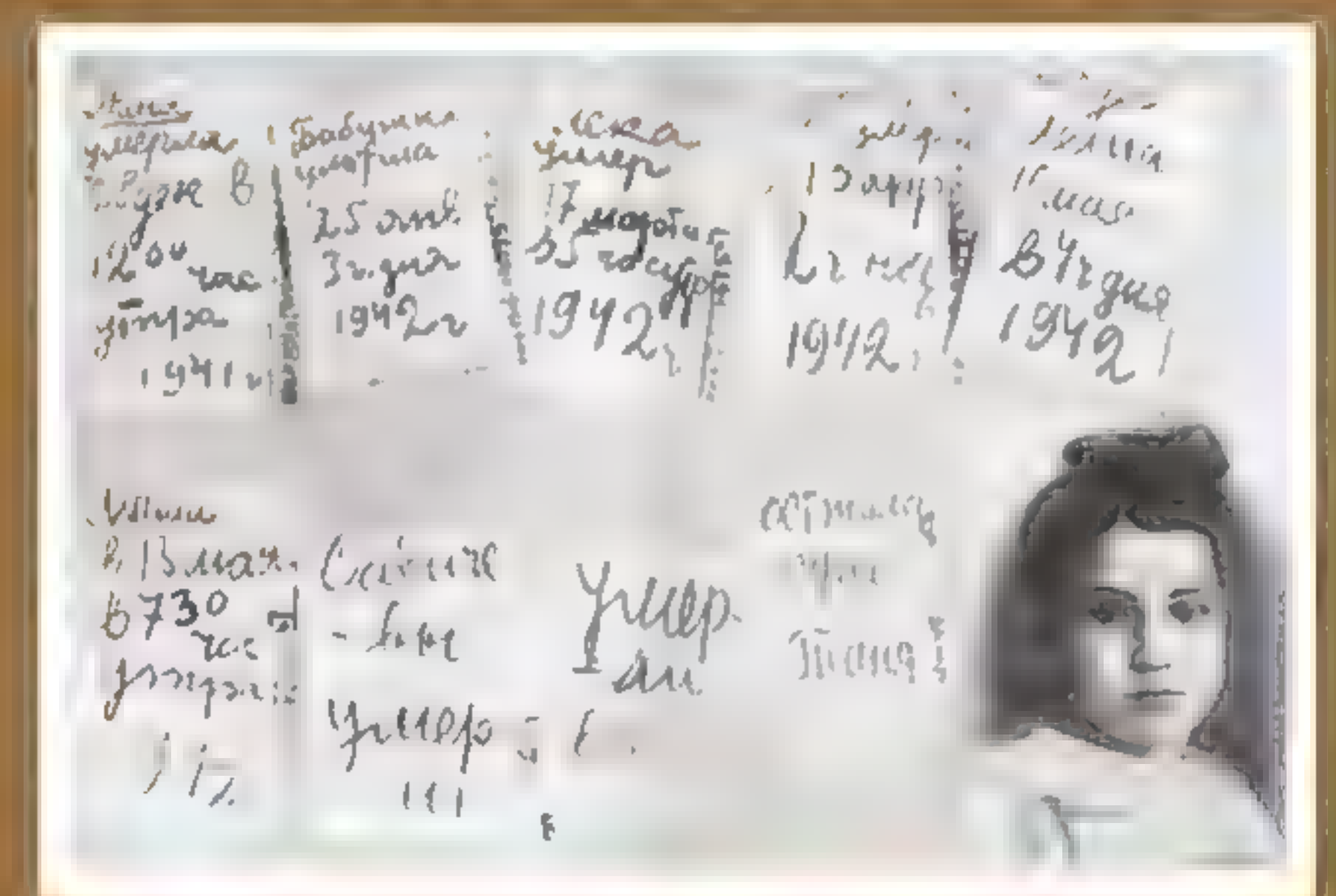
One of these reports includes a 42-year-old river port worker and his son who murdered, dismembered and ate their two housemates (in the report named only by their initials, M and I) before distributing the flesh, under the guise of horse meat, to trade for wine and cigarettes. On another occasion, the wife of a Red Army soldier lured a 13-year-old girl into her room and killed her with an axe to feed to her two children aged somewhere between eight and 11 years old. There were so many reports of desperate, starving people eating corpses that the NKVD started a special unit of police and psychiatrists dedicated to trying to minimise the cannibalism.

Despite these tragedies and crimes that were committed in the name of survival, many citizens still clung to humanity, determined that their suffering would not mean they would lose themselves. After the first devastating winter, in the summer of 1942 people still found ways to stay optimistic, with one diarist named Klavdiya Naumovna writing, "The people are clean; they've started to wear nice dresses. The tram is running, shops are opening up bit by bit. There are queues at the perfume shops – there's been a delivery of perfume to Leningrad... I was very happy. I love perfume so! I put some on myself and I feel like I'm not hungry, like I've just returned from a concert or a restaurant."

After the siege ended the government passed out cabbage and carrot seeds and the people of Leningrad planted every available piece of land with vegetables as the streets filled with citizens celebrating victory.

Cats were introduced into the city again to protect the new small crops from rats. People came together to start to rebuild. Families were reunited with loved ones who were outside the blockade when the circle closed, real bread made from flour returned to the market, and a healthy glow came back to the complexions of the survivors. Life had returned to Leningrad, but many of its secrets would be buried for decades, countless diaries and NKVD reports languishing in archives behind the Iron Curtain until the USSR's collapse.

Pages from the diary of the teenage Tanya Savicheva







*The Siege of Leningrad ended in January 1944*



In total desperation some turned to cannibalism: "One woman, utterly worn out... said that when her husband fainted through exhaustion and lack of food, she hacked off part of his leg to make soup for her and her children. Another said she cut off part of a dead body lying in the street." These women were caught and executed by the authorities. Gangs formed and preyed upon people walking alone at night, parents ate their children, and children waited for their parents to die, as one survivor recalled: "I watched my mother and father die. I knew perfectly well they were starving, but I wanted their bread ration more than I wanted them to stay alive." This was Leningrad's nadir.

However, the Soviet authorities were also partly to blame for the city's misery. By the beginning of December 1941 Lake Ladoga had frozen and the Soviets built an ice road across it – the so-called 'Road of Life'. Despite Luftwaffe bombing attacks and the treacherous nature of the crossing, by the end of the year over 4,000 trucks were taking 700



tons of food and supplies into the city every day and were available to evacuate citizens out. By 10 February that daily amount had grown to 3,000 tons, allowing the authorities to actually increase the bread ration back up to its September levels of 500 grams for factory workers. But in reality most citizens weren't getting anything like this allowance as corruption became endemic, with Party officials plundering the convoys for their own benefit. Stalin and local Party bosses also delayed civilian evacuation, convinced it would send the wrong message about their willingness to defend the city. The decision cost thousands of lives.

A dysentery epidemic then struck the population, who, already severely weakened by malnutrition, succumbed in huge numbers. Nadia Makarova described the horror in a letter to her sister: "After two weeks of sickness and diarrhoea our dear and beloved mother died... Three days before mother died I lost little Misha and Fedya, now I have only two children left."

Even as spring approached the daily death toll remained at between 20,000 and 25,000. As Olga Freidenberg said, "It was a flood of death that no one could handle."

Then, on 8 March, Women's Day (a traditional Soviet holiday), the authorities ordered the city's female population out onto the streets to begin



*Above left: Nurses help an old woman from the wreckage of a bombed house*

*Above middle: A truck brings supplies into Leningrad on the famed Road of Life across Lake Ladoga*

*Above right: Leningrad's citizens clear ice and rubble off the city's famous Nevsky Prospekt*

a massive clear-up of snow, rubble and refuse. A week later there were 100,000 of them spending several hours a day cleaning up. Remarkably, this collective effort began to work, as Elena Martilla acclaimed, "We would defy Hitler's cruel order that our city should be erased from the Earth... we were proud to be called Leningraders."

Finally, on Wednesday 15 April, the nurse Vera Pavlova was working in a hospital when, "We all heard the sound of a tram bell clanging. There was a gasp of astonishment... it's victory!"

Gefreiter Falkenhorst was in a German trench: "I began to lose my faith in Hitler when I heard the sound of tramcars on Leningrad's streets."

The siege would cost the lives of over a million Leningraders and would only finally be lifted on 27 January 1944, but that first terrible winter was over. Poet Olga Berggolts endured the siege and wrote a poem that is engraved in the Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery where her husband is buried: "Know you who gaze upon these stones, None is forgotten, and nothing is forgotten."

**"WE WOULD DEFY HITLER'S CRUEL ORDER THAT OUR CITY BE ERASED FROM THE EARTH"**



# HITLER'S DREAM OF POWER REQUIRED LOYAL COMMANDERS AND KILLER MACHINES

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## MARKED FOR DESTRUCTION

Staring out from behind a barbed-wire fence, these Soviet prisoners could have had no understanding of the fate that likely awaited them. Deemed untermenschen (subhuman) by the Nazi authorities, the Slavic people were to be systematically destroyed through forced labour, mass murder and starvation. Approximately 20 million Soviet civilians were killed during the war, many of them shot. One soldier wrote home to his wife that after several attempts, "I aimed calmly and shot surely at the many women, children, and infants..." The war made monsters of many men.



# DELIVERING THE GOODS

As German forces swept over the border, Soviet high command made the audacious decision to physically relocate vast swathes of their industry

WORDS: CALLUM MCKELVIE

As the German Army poured across the border, Stalin was faced with a disturbing possibility. In the previous years, as the threat of war had increased, Soviet industry had adopted a policy of heavy rearmament. However, large amounts of munitions plants and facilities were located in territory now under direct threat from the Nazi war machine. Indeed, some 60 per cent of armament, coal and steel facilities and 85 per cent of aviation factories were located on land that by the end of 1941 had fallen under German control, seriously endangering the Soviet war effort and thereby any hopes of victory.

However, the threats were economical as well as physical and went far beyond the Soviet Union's military industry. Should the invaders capture the numerous coal and steel plants in this area, then not only would Stalin lose large swathes of the Soviet defence industry but the entire Soviet economy would be placed under the threat of collapse. For the Soviet Union to be able to repel this new threat to its existence Stalin knew that the survival of the country's industry was key.

Soon after the German invasion began the decision was made to physically relocate huge numbers of factories under threat from German attack further east to the Urals, West Siberia and Central Asia. Defence industries were prioritised and moved first due to their importance to the war effort. Plants such as those that produced steel and munitions were dismantled, with the Soviet railway used to transport them east. Machinery was prioritised by both its function and the difficulty required to transport it.

The planning of this vast undertaking was carried out by the Evacuation Council, formed a mere two days after the German invasion began. This organisation was created by Stalin to coordinate the Soviet evacuation of civilians and industry. In the cities most under threat, the council organised groups composed of political

officials and senior factory personnel who oversaw the evacuations. The movement of a factory would not take place until the last possible moment and until then it was expected to maintain production as much as possible. If a machine could not be moved, then all efforts would be made to destroy it rather than let it fall into the hands of the invaders. If the machinery was large and not easily disposed of then explosives would be used.

The Evacuation Council was faced with the problem of finding locations to house the factories – no easy task in the short time provided. In some cases, existing sites were expanded so they could house up to 30 times their original capacity.

Along with the various pieces of equipment, there was also the relocation of millions of workers and their families. Many of the areas selected did not have the infrastructure to support a sudden influx of workers and providing housing was always a major concern. According to Walter Scott Dunn, some factories were able to resume production in six to eight weeks, though others required longer.

The entire plan depended on the efficiency of the Soviet railway system. By 20 November 1941, a total of 914,000 rail car loads of equipment had been evacuated. Yet it was no easy task. The quality of the trains being used was often sub-par, the heavy equipment damaged the track and routes were often blocked. Additionally, care had to be taken to not let Soviet railroad cars (rolling stock) be captured as German cars were incompatible with Soviet tracks. The importance of the railways was emphasised when Stalin stated that (should the Red Army be overwhelmed) "all rolling stock must be evacuated, the enemy must not be left a single engine". If necessary, rolling stock was destroyed.

However, not every factory could be moved and problems did occur. While hundreds of thousands of rail cars full of equipment were evacuated, Walter Scott Dunn suggests that even this vast

amount did not fully utilise the potential of the railways. It was impossible to relocate every factory and 32,000 were either captured or destroyed by the invading German army. Additionally, according to **Batalie.pl** some 300 factories were unaccounted for and either lost, stolen or captured while on route to the East.

Nonetheless, despite the fairly chaotic circumstances and occasional disaster, the evacuation can largely be viewed as a triumph of logistical planning. Indeed, by the end of 1941 some 2,593 industries had been relocated, including 1,523 large sites. The relocation of vast swathes of industry to the Urals and further east was one of the key factors in ensuring the USSR's victory over Nazi Germany.

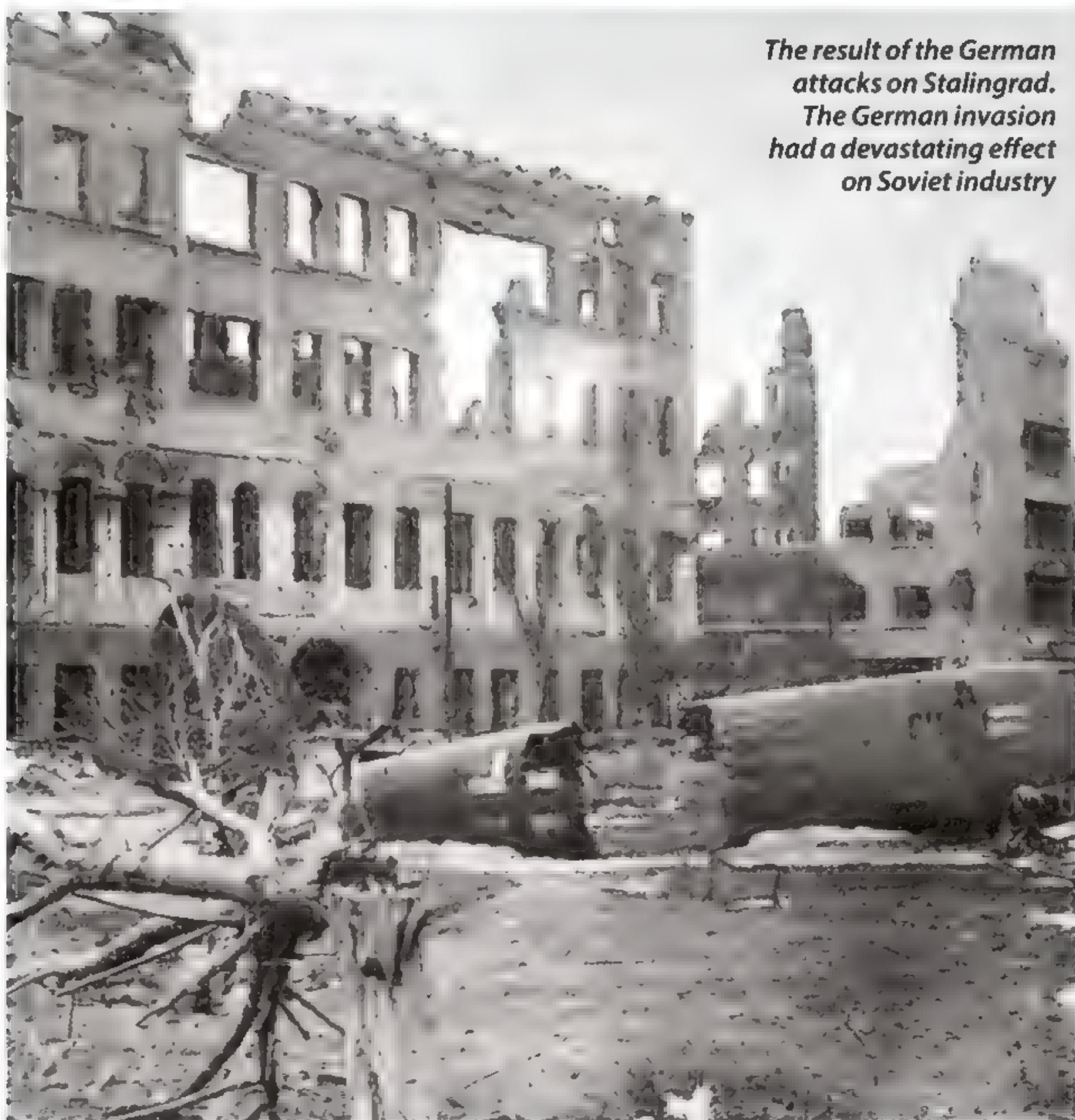
*Soviet soldiers load dismantled equipment onto railway cars ready to be transported to the East*







Trains were prepared to move to the front line. The Soviet railway system was extremely important to the war effort and evacuation



The result of the German attacks on Stalingrad. The German invasion had a devastating effect on Soviet industry



Evacuated machinery is unloaded at a factory in the Urals



# KILLING GROUNDS

The mass murder of civilians on the Eastern Front was part of the most despicable genocide in human history

WORDS: JAMES HORTON





**T**here have been many examples of mass murder during periods of war. Roman legions flooded over walls of defending settlements and massacred all inside. Mongol hordes decimated army after army and razed cities to the ground. Millions have starved to death as warring armies ravaged their land in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. But the Nazi genocide marks something quite different. It represents a targeted, organised and ruthless strategy of forced labour and mass murder on the scale of millions. Murder of certain peoples was the objective from the outset, a precedent that Hitler and his party had established in the 1930s with their increasing aggressiveness then outright violence against

Germany's Jewish population. Upon the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Hitler brought this despicable ideology within the borders of the USSR and inflicted it upon the Jewish, Slavic and Bolshevik people who lived there.

The depravity of the genocide is a blight on human history. The actions of the Nazi forces expose us to the abominable cruelty of which humans are capable, the complete lack of empathy we can achieve if we embrace racist ideologies and the ease in which otherwise decent people can be indoctrinated into radical world views.

Why was Hitler so intent on brutality in the East? One key element is his dedication to acquiring Lebensraum (living space) for German colonists. The origin of Lebensraum preceded Hitler. The

idea was proposed by Friedrich Ratzel when the age of imperialism was at its height in Europe. Germany, like its neighbours, harboured imperialist visions, and by the outbreak of WWI advocated for achieving Lebensraum by seizing the territory of Russia. The rhetoric surrounding the capture of Baltic provinces during the war was troubling, with journalists celebrating the introduction of 'German seed' into the 'Russian Badlands'. Even after losing the war Germany continued with these colonial pursuits into 1919 by supporting guerrilla soldiers known as the Freikorps.

As Hitler ascended to power his desire for Lebensraum never wavered, in part as he had been convinced by the academic Karl Haushofer that a weakness of mainland Germany was its capacity to yield enough food. The main concern for the Baltic population was that for living space to be acquired there must be just that – space. Hitler's proposal to make room for his German colonists was to force the Soviets to emigrate to Siberia or send them into slave labour. The additional third approach, taken far too often during the war, was to simply kill them.

However, a desire for colonisable territory was not the only reason Hitler's men committed countless heinous acts with such vigour. A key element in convincing soldiers to commit mass murder is to strongly ideologically oppose and dehumanise the enemy. Thus the denigration of Slavic peoples and Bolsheviks alongside Jews went hand in hand with the pursuits of Lebensraum. As had been established by the rhetoric used by German reporters in the previous war, many Germans saw the Soviets living in the 'Badlands' as a lesser people. This mentality broadly swept to include all Slavic peoples who resided on the Eastern Front. But a special hatred was reserved for Bolsheviks, who had become twisted and entangled in Hitler's mind with the supposed menace of international Jewry. Through discussions with fellow Nazi Party member Alfred Rosenberg, Hitler had become convinced that the Jewish population was behind the destabilising Bolshevik revolution in Russia. To Hitler and those who shared his views, a population of undesirables were acting at the behest of Germany's most-vilified enemy will occupying desirable land. Therefore it was considered imperative that these other peoples were also annihilated in the maelstrom primarily designed to destroy the Jews – Hitler's 'final solution'. For many in Hitler's security forces and military, it was not hard to adopt a radical stance against such a foe.

Many of Hitler's most willing acolytes eagerly joined his security arm, the Einsatzgruppen. These units were arranged into groups around 3,000 strong and followed in the wake of the rampaging Wehrmacht as it swept through Soviet territory in the summer of 1941. The Einsatzgruppen's primary objective was cementing German control over captured territory. This involved establishing spy networks, sniffing out locals planning resistance and severely persecuting 'undesirable' citizens. The units were marauding bands of murderers who were largely composed of security police and SS





## THE STORM BREAKS

forces supported by the army, allied military, local police and sometimes local citizens as they carried out massacre after massacre. Jews were thoroughly rooted out of the population and either secluded to ghettos, sent to forced labour camps or killed in mass shootings. One of the most infamous mass executions occurred in the ravine of Babi Yar in Ukraine in 1941. In just two days SS officers slaughtered 33,771 Jews.

Commissars – who were considered by the Nazi's as Communist puppet masters manipulating weak-minded citizens – were captured and enslaved or killed with equal relish. So too were Roma, or gypsies, and those with mental or physical disabilities, who were deemed no use as labourers and so instead were put to death. The killing squads committed atrocities that extended to women and children, who like their brothers, husbands, sons and fathers were stripped, shot and thrown in mass graves.

Such were the sadistic beliefs of these units that many committed their killings in a bespoke manner, with some forgoing shootings to lock Jewish captives in synagogues, starving them then burning them alive. The scale of these mass murders was so immense that significant efforts were made to improve the efficiency of killings – group shootings of unarmed citizens was deemed too messy and stressful for the German soldiers to go through repeatedly. Mobile gas units were transported to Soviet territory to suffocate those inside with carbon monoxide. This abhorrent method was a precursor to the use of Zyklon B, which would soon be employed on a huge scale in gas chambers in the six Nazi death camps (all of which were constructed in occupied Poland). These efforts allowed a single operational unit of a few thousand men to kill hundreds of thousands of citizens over just two years.

It is tempting to lay the blame for these atrocities solely at the feet of the SS and Einsatzgruppen, who 'pacified' the rear while the Wehrmacht 'nobly' battled on the front line. But the military and its personnel acted in concert with these war crimes throughout their efforts on the Eastern Front. These acts weren't just quietly committed but instead were actively decreed by Nazi command. The Commissar Order was ruthlessly enforced by the killing squads, who captured and killed Soviet Communist Party officials with severe prejudice. The soldiers on the front line carried the same orders and killed many commissars throughout 1941 and into 1942. As the Soviet campaign wore on, however, this prerogative was relaxed as Wehrmacht command realised that rather than deflate resistance, word of the killings had the ironic consequence of hardening Soviet resistance.

The orders contained within the Barbarossa Decree, however, continued to be fulfilled throughout the campaign. The decree was dispersed to the men in the summer of 1941 and outlined how soldiers should 'handle' encountered Soviet citizens. The document awarded soldiers a licence to attack and kill civilians when faced with aggression. High command espoused that transporting arrested individuals was unfeasible



### "THE DOCUMENT AWARDED SOLDIERS A LICENCE TO ATTACK AND KILL CIVILIANS WHEN FACED WITH AGGRESSION"

at the front, and so court martials were suspended and instead officers could arrange firing squads without trial. Many soldiers didn't even allow the process to get that far, instead shooting 'enemy aggressors' without consultation. By July commanders on the front received orders to destroy the correspondence but with the insistence that soldiers continued to adhere to its contents. This was a total war, and despite knowing what the world would make of their barbarism, the Nazis were committed to enacting it.

A commander at the front's prerogative was, first and foremost, to win their battles and secure victory in the war. This priority was compounded by the difficulty the campaign commanders faced, especially in the autumn of 1941 as the Wehrmacht made its bold dash to Moscow. As such, the

brutal commands were met largely with a cold indifference by the heads of military, who cared little about the impending suffering of the local populace. Commanders heeded these instructions to differing degrees. Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein forbade his men from volunteering to join executions, and Generalleutnant John Ansat defiantly declared that his soldiers were "no hangman's assistants". But these weren't acts of noble compassion; rather it was concern over maintaining the discipline of their men.

Commanders were right to suspect soldiers would become unruly, as what high command granted was, in effect, carte blanche to commit as many war crimes as a soldier desired. When murder, the most extreme punishment of them all, was permitted, the soldiers felt empowered to do





*A group of Jewish men are rounded up by German officers to be transported to a nearby concentration camp*



*SS officers stand beside a pile of corpses that have been tossed into a trench in the middle of a forest*



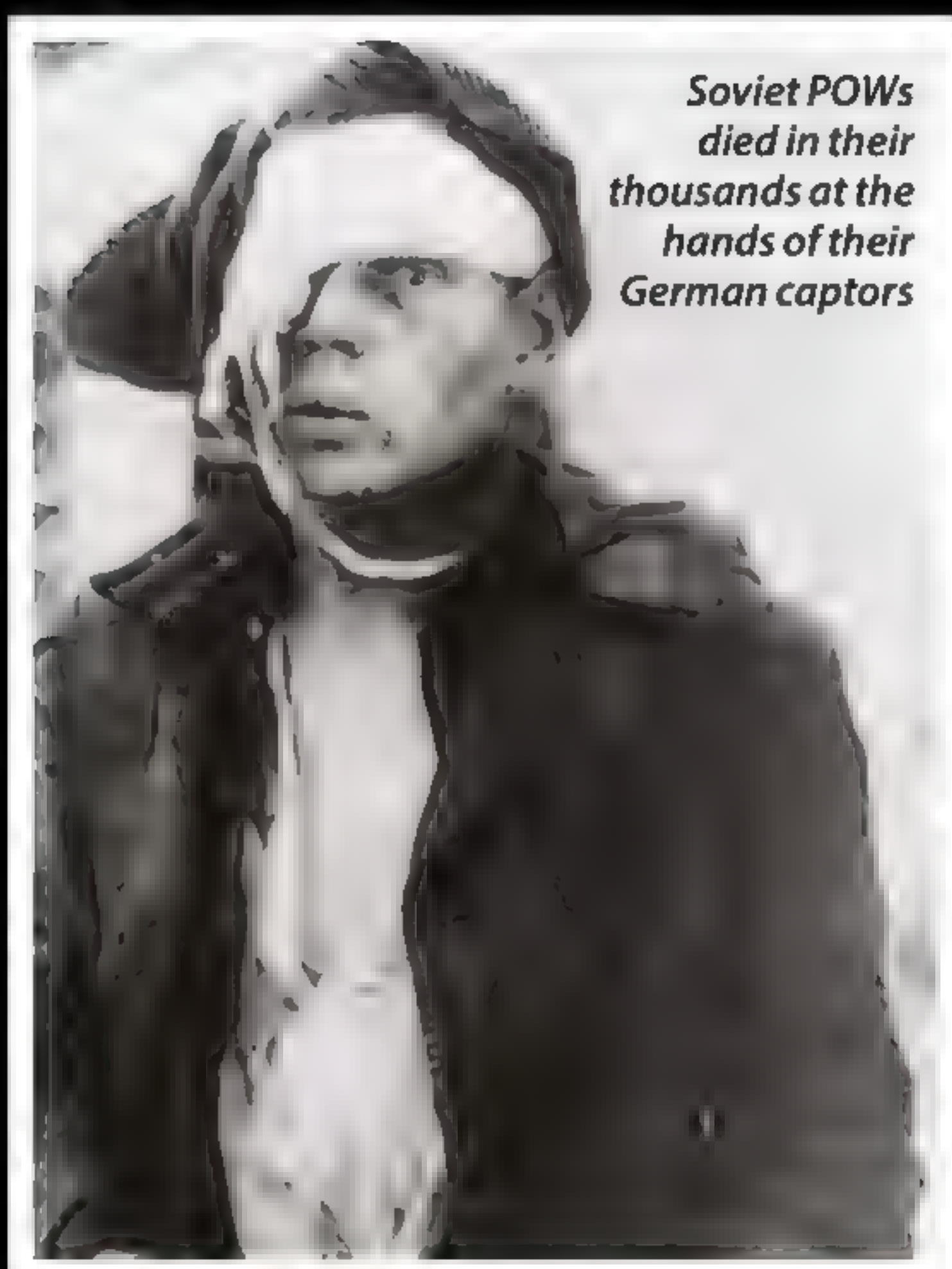
# CAPTIVE

The inhumane treatment Soviet prisoners of war had to endure

As the German tanks enveloped their lines and forced the Soviet soldiers to surrender in the summer and autumn of 1941, over a million soldiers must have wondered if, for them, the worst of the war was over. But their horrors had only just begun.

Soviet prisoners of war suffered horribly under the Nazi regime. In 1941, captured Soviet soldiers were transported en masse to forced labour camps, where they toiled on minimal rations. Officially they were allotted an underwhelming ration of around 2,200 calories per day, but in practice few received such a bounty. The Nazis instead opted to feed them bread made from 'wood flour', which was essentially made from sawdust. This substitute bread was barely edible and offered minimal nutritional value, and even this wasn't offered to the men in bulk. As such, many succumbed to malnutrition, while those who endured grew so ravenous they supplemented their rations with grass to assuage their hunger. There was no respite from starvation and no mercy away from it, as men were shot dead if they collapsed from exhaustion while being force-marched or if they succumbed to illness or injury.

From 1942, conditions for the prisoners began to improve as the German economy continued to fail. The men's reprieve was owed to their value as labourers, but this mercy was not extended to Jews, who were persistently killed despite their value. Even still, over 50 per cent of Soviet soldiers taken prisoner died during the war. And how did the Soviet Union repay those who had suffered so bitterly after defending their motherland? Incredulously, sometimes with more forced labour if they were suspicious of a returning soldier's loyalties. For those poor souls it was simply a transition from one hellscape to another as they were forced into confinement in a Soviet labour camp.



*Soviet POWs died in their thousands at the hands of their German captors*



*The horrors of the Babi Yar massacre were exposed by survivor Dina Pronicheva in a Soviet court in 1946*

almost anything to 'undesirables', and while rape – a truly despicable act regrettably common in many wars and raids throughout history – was banned, it was only prohibited on racist grounds. The Slavic peoples were considered inferior to the Germans, and the Nazis loathed the idea of 'polluting' the 'pure' Germanic bloodline. Even so, many women were raped and forced into prostitution when towns were captured.

The German soldiers became especially vicious as their own situation deteriorated. Nazi command had factored in that during the Soviet 'lightning campaign' soldiers would be required to live off the land to an extent. It had been calculated that millions of Baltic citizens would starve to death at the expense of feeding the German military. This was considered a bonus rather than a detraction of the strategy. But as the campaign wore on, the frosts descended and the land became barren, the cold and hunger instilled additional layers of cruelty into the German soldiers. The longer the campaign continued, the more incentive the men had to murder and pillage. This mistreatment of citizens was compounded by Soviet efforts to harass the Germans from behind enemy lines.

Soviet soldiers known as partisans waged a guerrilla war against the Wehrmacht, planting explosives and staging ambushes before seeking refuge in the rural lands of the Soviet Union. A partisan, to the German soldier's eye, was often indistinguishable from an ordinary citizen. This led to the butchering of many suspected 'partisans' in the villages, towns and cities of the Soviet Union.

Hitler's original vision of eviction and forced imprisonment of the population to acquire Lebensraum had distorted into a reality yet more brutal. This is not to suggest, however, that a rapid German victory would have resulted in less Slavic deaths. The western side of the Soviet Union was integral to its farming efforts.

Had Hitler forced the native peoples into the arid terrain of the East, many millions would have likely starved. Those that remained would have met the same fate but in forced labour camps. This



would have been by design, as the starvation that Soviet prisoners of war suffered in captivity was no mere consequence of war. British and American prisoners, who were considered an equal race by the Germans, did not starve to anywhere near the same degree.

The heinous war crimes continued as the momentum turned against the Germans and they were forced into retreat. In 1943, after a series of reversals, the Wehrmacht fell back through Poland, driving 45,000 citizens into labour camps on their way through. However, there was no infrastructure to support them. They had no shelter in which to sleep and no sanitary houses in which to relieve themselves. As a result, many died in miserable conditions from starvation and disease.

We might expect the German resolve to have softened as they were forced into retreat – or at least that they would refocus their efforts away from harming Soviet citizens. But following the huge number of despicable actions undertaken during the war, many would have become entrenched in their belief that their enemies were lesser beings. To realise that the 'barbaric Russians' who had bested them were, in fact, human beings of the same standing would be unconscionable to many German soldiers. Throughout WWII, 1.5 million Jews were put to death in Soviet territory, the majority of them shot in ravines and ditches. In total, Soviet losses amounted to 27 million lives, which equated to every fifth citizen perishing in the struggle to defeat the Nazis.



## KILLING GROUNDS

*With callous indifference, an SS officer prepares to execute a Jewish man with a shot to the back of the neck beside a ditch full of corpses*





# WOMEN OF THE MOTHERLAND

WORDS: BEE GINGER

## How the women of the Soviet Union fought to defend their homeland

**A**s the saying goes, "Behind every great man stands a great woman", and this was definitely the case when it came to the men of the Soviet Union during WWII, for behind every Red Army soldier charging into battle they stood a female medic, sniper or tank gunner ready to join them in the fight against Nazi Germany. These women's contributions were not just admirable – they required courage and daring on an almost impossible scale.

Initially, when the Soviets were attacked by Germany many thousands of women were turned away by army officials. However, following gargantuan losses at the front attitudes began to change, with women finally permitted to enlist to fight. Responding to the high number of male casualties, Stalin and his commanders arranged to replace the male soldiers with a second line of defence including women. These women quickly

proved their worth in various ways and in doing so helped to create a path for other women to follow that would eventually see them involved in combat and given equal roles to their male counterparts. The motherland called and they responded in their droves, with women of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds united by the war effort and a fierce sense of patriotism.

It wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that, given societal attitudes at the time, women must have played a small role in the defeat of Nazi Germany, but in fact they comprised approximately five per cent of military personnel, with 800,000 of them serving. Almost 200,000 of these women were decorated, with 89 receiving the highest accolade: Hero of the Soviet Union.

Having been born around the early to mid 1920s, most Soviet women will have experienced an upbringing very different to the one enjoyed by today's youth. With Joseph Stalin at the helm

the USSR had been steered through a variety of social transformations, the majority of which had been bloody and traumatic affairs. Arguably the most infamous were the Holodomor of 1932-33, which witnessed the mass starvation of millions of Ukrainians, and the Great Terror of 1936-38, a period of political repression that resulted in both members of the upper and peasant classes being repressed, imprisoned, starved and executed on trumped-up charges created at the behest of a paranoid Stalin desperate to consolidate his power. By the time war came to their doorstep the women of the USSR were no strangers to suffering, and efforts to improve their lot had been championed by none other than Vladimir Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, who prior to her death in 1939 had called for the right to equal pay, divorce and for abortion to be more accessible.

As the war raged many Soviet women commenced their journey in the field of medicine,

Marina Raskova, the first Soviet woman to earn a diploma in professional air navigation



An illustration of Moscow's female citizens erecting anti-tank defences and digging ditches







A female prisoner of war is interrogated by a German officer

with the government recruiting large numbers of students and fast-tracking them with a crash course in order to prepare them for immediate and direct combat. These women were not solely responsible for taking care of the wounded but also running onto the battlefield in order to retrieve soldiers while under fire from the enemy. Their training was rigorous and the government provided as much assistance as it could to prepare them for what they might face in the line of duty. However, the Germans were not the only problem they had to confront.

Strong chauvinistic attitudes towards women were harboured by many men who thought they shouldn't be directly involved. This meant that women were forced to match their male counterparts in an effort to prove themselves, which they did admirably, often taking on more hazardous tasks. They were brutal and tenacious when it came to warfare and became known for dealing with the enemy in an aggressive manner. This wasn't only directed at the Germans but also any Soviet who was deemed a coward or dared to desert the cause. Many of the women took pleasure in their achievements, carrying out their tasks with both precision and pride.

The roles a woman could fill varied greatly, from fighting as partisans, snipers, bomber pilots and tank crew to becoming scouts, nurses and surgeons (women comprised 43 per cent of physicians, who were sometimes required to carry rifles as they retrieved men from firing zones). There were also those who assisted in auxiliary roles. Behind the lines countless women toiled away in agriculture, industry and transport, often working long hours and double shifts in order to free up the men who needed to be fighting, thus helping to increase troop numbers. Through opportunities like this women gradually accrued greater credibility in both Soviet society and the military, with 500,000 serving at any given time towards the end of the war.

A significant number of Soviet partisans were women, with one of the more famous being high school student Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya. At the tender age of 18 she left Moscow and her studies behind and volunteered in a partisan unit, but her fight against the enemy was to be short-lived. After crossing into German-occupied territory and initiating a sabotage campaign aimed at transport and communication links, Zoya and her colleagues were tasked with setting the village



Women undertook numerous jobs including medics, nurses, snipers, tank drivers and political officers



## THE STORM BREAKS

of Pertrischevo on fire. After the initial shock of the inferno the Germans rallied and arrested Zoya and a fellow comrade. She was subjected to an interrogation and savage torture in the form of beatings, lashing and burning, and yet she would not give up the names of her comrades. In a speech before her death she warned her killers, "There are two hundred million of us; you can't hang us all!" She took her name and those of her group to her grave, never uttering a word to the enemy. When word of her defiance spread she was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

Other women who were directly involved in combat were positioned in the Air Defence Force. Marina Raskova, who would become known to many as the 'Soviet Amelia Earhart', rose to fame as both a navigator and pilot in the 1930s. Not only was she the first female navigator in the Soviet Air Force, but thanks to her personal connections to Stalin she was able to convince the military to create three regiments for women centred around combat, one of which was an all women's air force – the 588th Aviation Regiment. The first female group to take part in open combat, it played a crucial role, striking fear into the heart of the enemy, who in turn labelled them the "Nachthexen" (night witches).

It was the whooshing noise of their plywood bi-planes, which resembled the sound of a sweeping broom, that gained the Nachthexen their German nickname. However, before they could tackle the enemy each recruit required rigorous training at the Engels School of Aviation, where each recruit had to learn all aspects of their field, from ground crew and maintenance responsibilities to the roles of navigators and pilots.

Unprepared for female pilots, the air force gave the women oversized boots, second-hand uniforms and meagre resources. Equipment was outdated, even dangerous, with the women flying open-cockpit planes that were never intended for combat. Worse still, the limited weight capacity of these planes left no room for parachutes or radar. Instead, compasses, maps, torches and stop watches became essential tools.

Thanks to Stalin's revised orders women could now drop bombs for the first time in history, engage in combat and return fire. Due to the flimsiness of the planes only two bombs could be transported at a time, which meant that one plane could be tasked with as many as 18 sorties per night. The weight of the bombs forced the planes to fly lower, thus making them an easier

*An all-female sniper unit.  
Some of the Soviets' most  
lethal shooters were women*



**"THE AIR FORCE GAVE WOMEN OVER-SIZED BOOTS, SECOND-HAND UNIFORMS AND MEAGRE RESOURCES. EQUIPMENT WAS OUTDATED, EVEN DANGEROUS"**





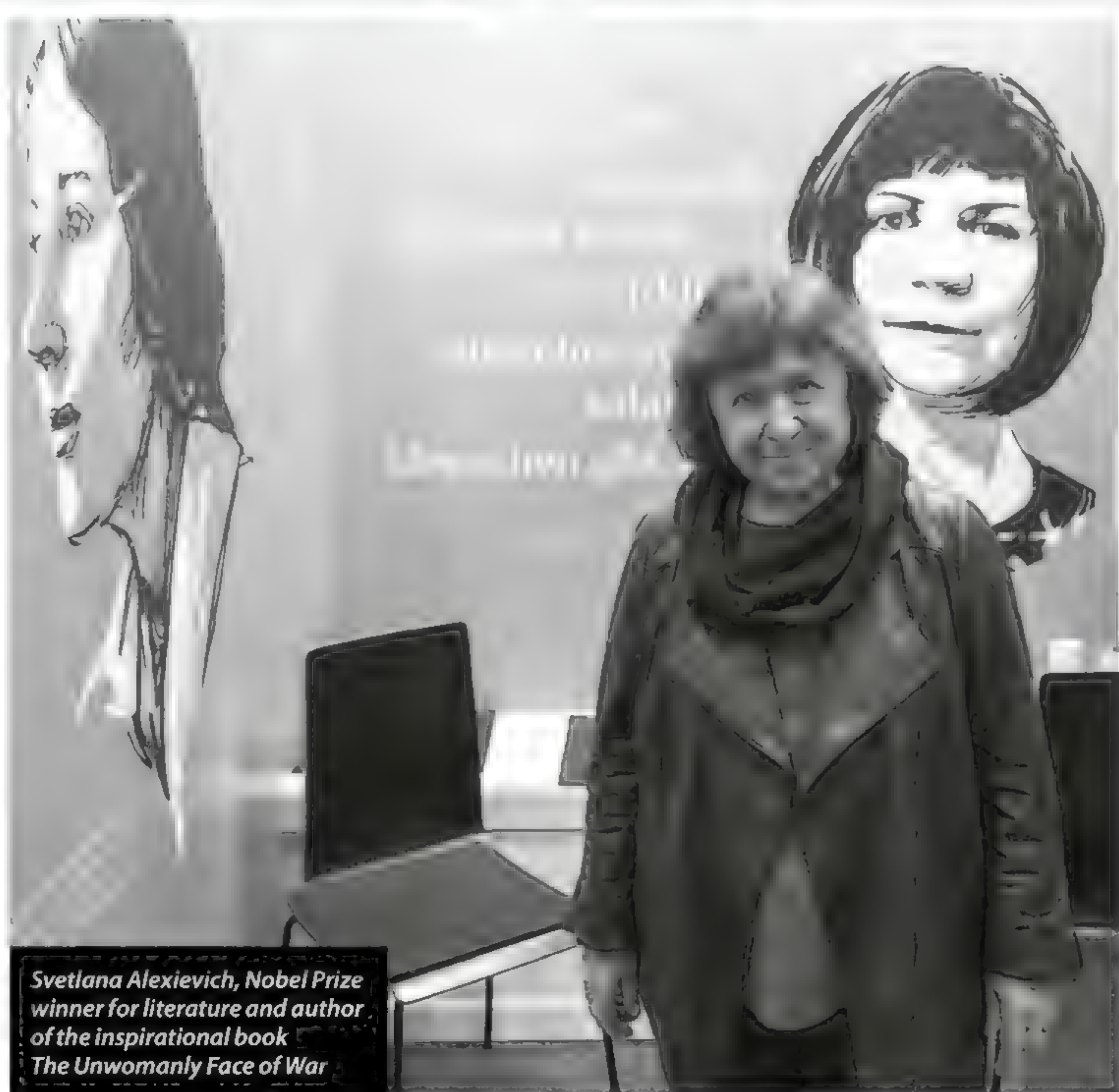




Armed with bayonets and rifles, these female guerilla fighters risked torture and execution



Nadezhda Popova, commander of the 46th Taman Guards Night Bomber Regiment



Svetlana Alexievich, Nobel Prize winner for literature and author of the inspirational book *The Unwomanly Face of War*





Decorated female fighters  
celebrate the 750th anniversary  
of the founding of Kaliningrad

target. Yet these heroic women remained positive and undeterred, even adorning their aircraft with decorations. Over 30,000 missions were flown, with a total loss of only 30 planes. The pioneering women of the 588th Night Bomber Regiment dropped a staggering 23,000 tons of bombs on their loathed German targets, including a key enemy headquarters.

Due to the fact that these planes were too small to be picked up by radar or infrared and didn't use radio, they were untraceable and therefore highly feared by the German Army. So much so, that capturing or killing a 'witch' earned a German airmen an immediate reward – the highly prestigious Iron Cross medal. The Germans couldn't understand the Soviets using women in combat and felt they should not participate in actual battle (German women were given secondary duties such as driving and guarding prison camps). The fact that almost a million women were enlisted to fight came as quite the surprise to the German Army, but their amazement soon turned to hatred. Despite the order not coming directly from the SS or the Gestapo, many superiors in the German Army took it upon themselves to shoot women soldiers who had been taken as prisoners of war. Others suffered sexual abuse, torture and eventually execution.

Closer to the ground, Soviet women proved themselves to be lethal snipers. One famous shooter was Lyudmila Pavlichenko. Known to many as "Lady Death", she terrorised the Germans, racking up a remarkable 309 confirmed kills in only a few months of service. Enrolled in the 25th Rifle Division, she was one of 2,000 female snipers fighting in the Red Army. Tragically, not all of her comrades were as successful as she was, with only 500 surviving the war.

Manshuk Mametova was another famous contributor, this time as a machine gunner. She was also the first Asian Soviet to be awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union award for her outstanding acts of bravery.

As for Raskova, she would sadly perish on 4 January 1943 after finally being sent to the front line. The mother and leader of the 588th was honoured with the very first state funeral of the war and her ashes were laid to rest inside the Kremlin. An inspiration for future generations, she was a daredevil and heroine until the end.

In Svetlana Alexievich's book *The Unwomanly Face of War* she tells of the first-hand accounts of some of the women involved in the fight to save the Soviet Union. Moving and harrowing in equal measure, there runs through them a sense of injustice at having to continuously prove oneself

to their male superiors and counterparts. One account tells of a group of female fighters arriving at the front line to report for duty only to be met with their commander tutting "they've foisted girls on me". Little did he know that they were in fact sniper school graduates and assigned to the 62nd Rifleman's Division. Insisting they could prove their worth, the commander was left red-faced when they completed their tasks and exercises with precision. He also had to retract his words when he stepped on a hummock and the female sniper embedded underneath demanded he get off. Despite the Soviet regime changing in order to accommodate female fighters, the attitudes of their male counterparts took longer to revise. But regardless of what they thought, millions of women made a huge impact.

With every able-bodied man and woman doing their bit, the Soviet Union managed to hold back the German tide and turn the course of the war. The way in which the nation's womenfolk rushed to enlist was nothing short of revolutionary, and they were later rightly hailed for being the only female combatants who fought outside their country's borders. By taking the fight to the enemy at home and abroad, they crushed both an invading force and the patriarchal notion of a man's war. Their courage will never be forgotten.









## HEADING TO THE FRONT

Heading for the front, these Soviet troops sit aboard a train bound for the front lines. The Soviet Union was heavily reliant on its railways, the second largest rail network in the world at the time, to transport soldiers across vast areas to where they were needed most. In a bid to frustrate the Germans during the early stages of Barbarossa, the Soviets sabotaged the bulk of their railroad cars, thereby obscuring the realities of the use of Soviet railways, as the German rail were of a different gauge and therefore unable to operate on Soviet rails.



# AT THE GATES OF MOSCOW

WORDS: JAMES HORTON

The ambitious assault aimed at capturing  
the prize of the Soviet Union





**“THE SOVIET UNION HAD  
LOST VAST SWATHES OF  
TERRITORY, SUFFERING  
DEFEAT AFTER CRUSHING  
DEFEAT AT GERMAN HANDS”**

*Below: The Battle of Moscow 1941,  
by Evgeny Ivanovich Danilevsky*

**W**e will, without fail, hold Moscow.” Marshal Georgy Zhukov was resolute in the autumn of 1941 when asked by the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, if they could realistically defend the Soviet capital. Zhukov’s adamant reply may have come as a comfort to Stalin, but it may have also been a surprising one, as the Soviet situation looked dire. Since June of that year the Soviet Union had lost vast swathes of territory, suffering defeat after crushing defeat at German hands as the Axis streamed into the USSR. By the beginning of October the Germans’ eastern army, the Ostheer, had once again set its sights on Moscow and devised a plan of conquest codenamed Operation Typhoon. Army Group Centre – the division of the Ostheer tasked with driving straight at the heart of Soviet Russia – had secured its flanks and was on the march.

Operation Typhoon began with yet more savage successes for the Germans. The month opened with protracted battles near Vyazma and the Bryansk Oblast, which stood between the Germans and their ultimate target. The commander of Army Group Centre, Fedor von Bock, achieved success in part thanks to the arrival of the 2nd Panzer Army, which outflanked the Soviets. The Red Army soldiers were enveloped but continued to fight bitterly until mid-October, doing their part by slowing the German advance to their capital.

The commander of the 2nd Panzer Army, Heinz Guderian, had played instrumental roles in the invasions of Poland and France and had recently helped the Ostheer capture Kiev. He had returned to Army Group Centre at less than full strength but buoyed by his confidence in an impending German victory. The capture of Moscow was to be conducted by means of a pincer attack, with Guderian’s forces attacking from the south via







*The October Revolution parade went ahead in 1941 despite the looming German threat*



*Although they began the defence of Moscow at a numerical disadvantage, the Soviets quickly replenished their ranks*

Tula, panzer commanders Georg-Hans Reinhardt and Erich Hoepner leading forces from the north, and the rest of Bock's forces progressing from the centre. At the beginning of the advance on Moscow the central battle line stretched for over 435 miles and consisted of nearly 2 million German soldiers.

Bock's forces followed up on their success by dislodging Soviet resistance stationed at key points en route to Moscow that composed the Mozhaisk Defensive Line, which included Volokolamsk, Mozhaisk, Maloyaroslavets and Kaluga. Yet despite these military victories the advance would soon be slowed – then stalled – by an underestimated obstacle: Russian weather. Nazi command was acutely aware of the harsh Russian winter that scuppered Napoleon's campaign in 1812, and as such their invasion was characteristically aimed at achieving a quick resolution. Despite this, Hitler had ordered that Army Group Centre pause their advance during the previous month, as Army Group's North and South had not made as much ground. The result was that the German front line, which stretched for well over 932 miles, bulged at its centre in an easterly direction, leaving the centre exposed at its flanks. German high command knew that their objectives must be attained by winter if they were to have any chance of success, yet Hitler peeled forces away from Bock to fight elsewhere. By the time the German line had realigned it was nearly October, meaning that from its inception Operation Typhoon was a race against time.

Although the Germans were aware of the impending bitter cold, they didn't consider the challenges the Russian autumn would set upon them. During spring and autumn, periods of heavy



rainfall and melted snow known as 'rasputitsta' drowned and bogged down country roads, rendering them inaccessible to German vehicles. The toll was even worse on the infantry, who had to wade through the quagmire in filthy uniforms that weren't being replaced. All the while during this advance the Germans endured repeated bombardments and infantry assaults from pockets of Soviet soldiers. Some divisions had been depleted so badly from these efforts they had a mere 25 per cent of their effective fighting force remaining. This was the beginning of a severe strain on the men, which was only set to get worse over the coming months.

By the end of October traversing the terrain was becoming so difficult that the decision was made to pause the advance until the first winter frosts hardened the roads. The Soviets made the most of this period of idleness from the Germans. Zhukov ordered around 250,000 citizens of Moscow to carve a defensive ring around the city with a radius of about ten miles, and this was reinforced by extra defensive rings within the city walls. The trenches and barricades were laden with rows of barbed wire and reinforced concrete. Additionally, houses that overlooked the barricades were converted

## "GERMAN HIGH COMMAND KNEW THAT THEIR OBJECTIVES MUST BE ATTAINED BY WINTER IF THEY WERE TO HAVE ANY CHANCE OF SUCCESS"

into makeshift defensive positions by bricking up windows but leaving firing slits for gunmen to strike the enemy.

The manpower available to the Soviets at this stage, however, remained precarious. The USSR had a previously unseen tolerance for absorbing losses, but their numbers in the immediate vicinity of Moscow were currently depleted owing to the many sizable defeats suffered on their Western front. At this time they remained heavily outnumbered by the invaders, and the citizens of Moscow were growing nervous. In a display of political astuteness, Stalin ordered that the October Revolution Parade go ahead in Red Square on 7 November as it had done for the last 24 years. Although this required many men to be held back from the front lines and trained in marching orders rather than battle tactics for several days, the parade galvanised and raised the spirits of Moscow's population. Stalin, who had sent others of his ruling party away from the city but decided to remain himself, added to the renewed fervour by delivering a powerful speech as the men prepared to march to the front.

Many soldiers were then sent needlessly to their deaths against the Germans, forgoing all the advantages they had enjoyed in defence, like entrenched positions. These counterattacks were insisted on by Stalin, despite Zhukov warning him

of the wastage of lives. Perhaps the most extreme example of this recklessness came from waves of Mongolian cavalry who had been drafted in from the East. With their sabres drawn high, the men on horseback charged across an open field towards prepared German gunfire. The soldiers and their steeds were laced with bullets and in some cases exploded as the enemy shells ruptured through their lines. And yet when the dust settled the German soldiers were amazed to see another wave of cavalymen charging in their direction, directly towards the obliterated corpses of their comrades. Neither the second or third wave got any closer than the first.

This is not to say that the Soviet counterattacks enjoyed no success at all, however. At some pressure points across the vast German line the Soviets inflicted thousands of casualties, and both the successes and failures left the Germans with a novel appreciation that perhaps their enemy was in fact far from defeated and would continue to fight defiantly for every inch of their homeland.

Operation Typhoon resumed in the frost of mid-November. Although the ground was once again solid beneath their feet, the plummet in temperature to well below freezing, coupled with advancement yet further away from the stretched supply lines, left the Germans more harmed than helped as winter neared. The oil and lubricants in their tanks, vehicles and artillery shells began to freeze, and it became ever more difficult to keep the motor divisions running. The frost also rendered optical aiming instruments less accurate, and the narrow German tank treads struggled to gain traction on the icy roads.

Yet for all the frustrations of their machinery failing, the German soldiers themselves once more suffered worse. The Ostheer was drawing further from its supply lines of rail networks, a problem that was compounded in the frost, as many of the transport trucks moving goods to the front began to fail. This meant that the men went hungry and received essentially no winter apparel. The clothing problem was made worse by Hitler's insistence that the Jewish factory labourers making sorely needed warm apparel be put to death instead of allowing them to finish their work.

Despite these difficulties, the Germans continued their advance. Unlike many of the previous engagements the Ostheer had enjoyed – where the panzer divisions exploited their mobility to outflank the enemy – throughout November the Germans had little choice but to charge headfirst into prepared Soviet positions. The war became one of attrition, and the Germans were losing men at a simply unsustainable rate. The Soviet propaganda movie *Moscow Strikes Back* summarised the German plight: "They advanced, but over a landscape carpeted by Nazi dead."

The Soviets, to their credit, were conceding ground but doing so slowly, fighting doggedly at each bottleneck. Siberian divisions, who specialised in cold-climate fighting, were drafted in from the Soviet's eastern front and waged total war against the German invaders. The defence of the village of Gorodishche saw 812 Siberian

# STAND YOUR GROUND

## How Stalin's NKVD blocking detachments prevented retreat by any means necessary

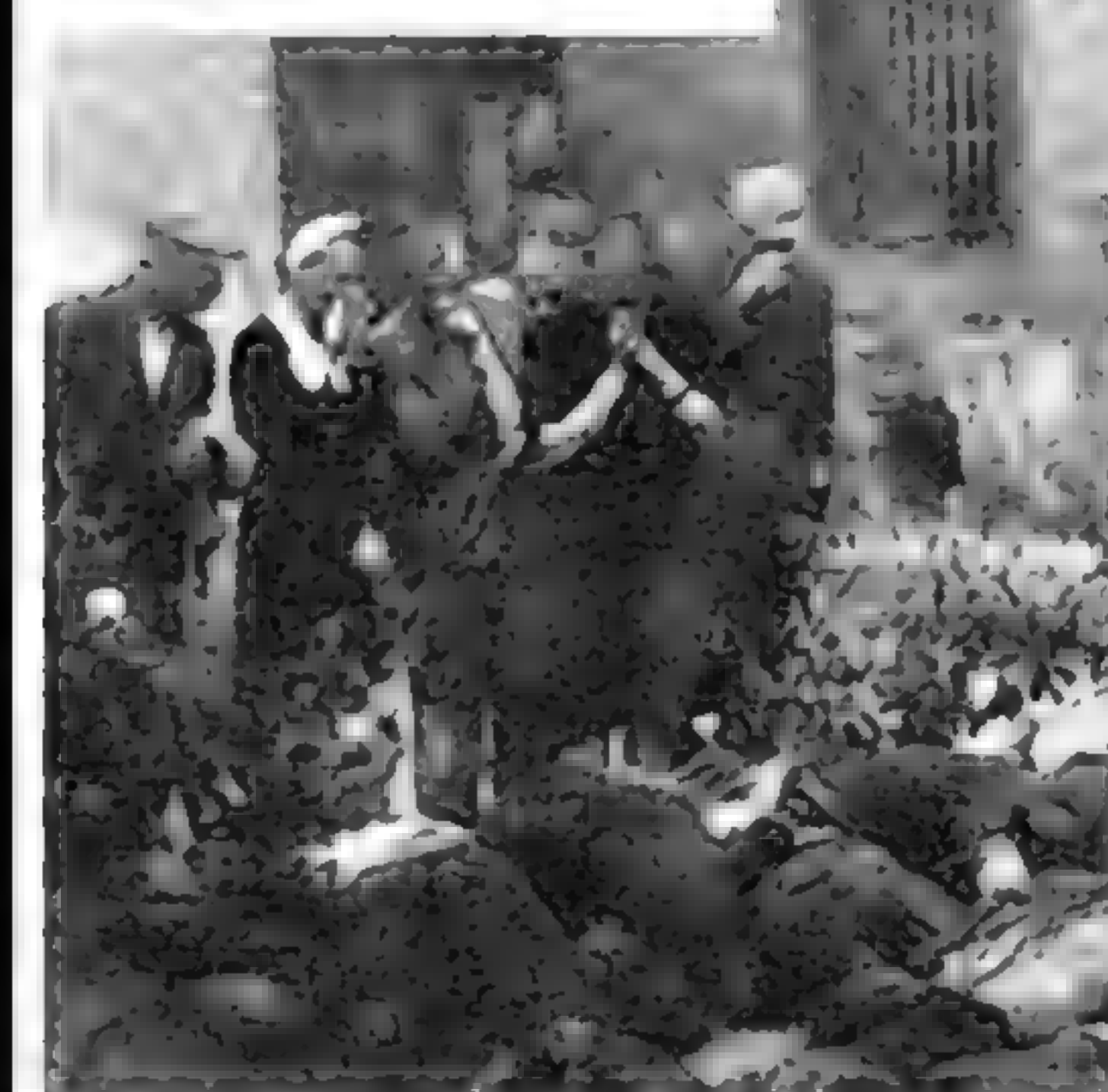
Although the situation for Moscow was not quite as precarious as the closeness of the German Army suggested it to be, the battle between the Germans and Soviets in 1941 was a brutal affair. Ideologically the two sides were staunchly opposed, with the Germans killing many 'Bolsheviks' and 'partisans' – of which many were unarmed citizens – in cold blood.

Many Soviet soldiers were additionally inspired to avenge fallen comrades and protect their motherland. Therefore the Red Army had much to fight for, but the element of fear should never be discounted. Some soldiers, especially those who were novices at soldiering, sought to flee. But Stalin would simply not allow it and turned to his trusted NKVD officers to ensure that the threat of death lay behind his men as well as in front.

The NKVD, or 'People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs', was established in 1934. It originally operated as a spying service, but throughout Stalin's reign it had grown in influence to act as the Soviet leader's brutal enforcement arm. By 1941 the NKVD had established rifle regiments to ensure Stalin's will was felt on the front lines. Mainly equipped with pistols and rifles, the NKVD 'blocking detachments' weren't intended as frontline combatants. Instead they operated as a second line with the mandate to ensure that no soldier – including officers – retreated without permission.

In the event of such a retreat, the blocking detachments would attempt to reverse the men with warnings – sometimes delivered as shots fired above their heads. If this didn't work then the soldiers were often arrested and detained, but in extreme cases fleeing men were simply shot by the NKVD troops. There was no room for mercy in the existential struggle against Nazi Germany.

Devastated relatives weep over the bodies of numerous victims of the NKVD





# DISPLACED

The unspoken tragedy of the Soviet peasants crushed between two opposing armies

By 21 November 1941, more German soldiers were in field hospitals because of illness than wounds. This was owed to the brutal Russian weather, which was steadfastly below freezing, and yet colder still with wind chill. Rather than quartering in winter barracks with warm clothes, the Germans remained on the march, edging closer to Moscow in their standard apparel while their appendages succumbed to frostbite and infections took hold in their lungs. The only reprieve the advancing soldiers could receive from the cold was in the villages and towns that sat on the path to the capital city. Thus these settlements became priority targets for the Germans to capture and for the Soviets to destroy, much to the horror of the poor families that called them home.

As the Ostheer had realised, warm clothing would not be forthcoming. Soldiers had wasted little time in stripping Russian citizens of possessions in their homes and the warm clothes covering their bodies. Some men were beaten as the soldiers tore their boots from the soles of their feet. As the cold deepened, so did the German soldier's cruelty. After capturing a village the men would throw families from their homes, stealing the warmth of their fires, comfort of their beds and food from their stores for themselves.

The sight of peasants freezing and starving to death was met largely with indifference. Rather than offering protection, when Stalin received word of the vulnerable state of the German Army, he sought to deny them shelter by any means necessary. The Soviet leader targeted all settlements within tens of miles from the main roads and enemy lines and had many bombed into oblivion, whether or not citizens remained inside.

Soviet peasants suffered greatly at the hands of both armies



Marshal Georgy Zhukov was drafted in by Stalin to mastermind the defence of Moscow

soldiers killed fighting to the last man. In situations where they enjoyed the reverse they repaid the compliment, killing all captured Germans – as was becoming standard practice. Both sides were becoming desperate, lacked the capacity to take prisoners and were harshly ideologically opposed. As such, prisoners were rarely taken, and so each man was often driven by fear to fight to their last breath instead of being taken alive.

At the northern pincer arm, Reinhardt and Hoepner's men endured dogged fighting in heavily fortified woodland littered with enemy positions. Snipers lay nestled in disguised elevated locations, heavy guns were entrenched in makeshift bunkers and seemingly indestructible heavy tanks had their cannons poised at the ready to greet the advancing columns. The roads were also obstructed with collapsed trees and laced with mines – sometimes thousands of them per square mile.

The new Soviet tanks, namely the medium T-34 and heavy KV-1, were especially dangerous. Panzer divisions landed direct hits on them to no effect, while their cannons tore through the German armour. A single KV-1 managed to keep a battalion pinned for an entire day, only succumbing once its crew ran out of ammo.

The southern flanking arm of the German advance was fairing even worse. By mid-November the southern roads may have frosted over, but even 78 miles from the periphery of Moscow the roads bore few marks of German tank treads. Guderian's forces had suffered greatly from combat losses and cold-related illnesses and were by this time operating at a meagre fraction of their former strength. His spearhead consisted of a division with just 15 tanks remaining, and elsewhere it wasn't much better. The battle group Guderian had used to capture the city of Tula en route to Moscow, for example, had been vastly depleted from 600 to 50 tanks. In a ludicrous indictment of insufficient logistical planning, Guderian's remnants still weren't supplied with enough fuel to make it to Moscow.

His forces had so few tanks that his men took the town of Yefremov without all the signatures of the German Army: tanks, air support and many heavy guns. Yet despite this accomplishment, reports were soon forthcoming that Siberian regiments were being prepared for a counterattack. It took three days for Guderian to realise the game was up. On 20 November he had to admit to high command that his objective was unattainable, coming to a halt well short of the Moscow border.





German paratroopers drift to earth along the Central Front to take part in Operation Typhoon



German officers man a radio post on the front



This poster called on Soviet citizens to 'Defend Moscow!'

**ОТСТОИМ МОСКВУ!**

The Germans to the north persisted in their advance, moving from town to town, grinding through stiff resistance with great difficulty against pockets of a few hundred Soviet soldiers at a time.

By 26 November Hoepner's men had captured the town of Istra, 22 miles from the border of Moscow. Advance parties pressed on with vigour and reached a village nine miles from the city, so close that they could glimpse it during clear skies and graze its outer suburbs with their artillery.

Yet this would be the closest the Germans would come to threatening Moscow. A tiny fraction of a battered and beleaguered force had nearly arrived at the gates, but even with considerably more soldiers, supplies and morale, they would still be hard-pressed to break through the multiple battle lines Zhukov had erected in the city – and the soldiers and 48,000-strong civilian militia that stood behind them – and thanks to the climate and the tenacity of the Soviet troops, they were nowhere close to that position.

The ramifications of losing the Battle of Moscow were gargantuan. The panzer divisions were decimated. This sacrifice had bruised the Soviet military but by no means crippled it – and that was with the full might of German strength. With Moscow still in their hands the Soviets retained

a beacon of hope, as well as the nexus of their logistical and trade networks.

As Stalin had shifted much of Soviet production further east, the USSR would have remained a formidable adversary even without Moscow, but the loss of their capital would have undeniably been a damaging blow. Contemporaries were right to suspect that if the Germans could not capture Moscow, the Soviets would soon be coming for Berlin. Although this would not be the last offensive for Soviet territory in the war, the Germans had missed their golden opportunity to debilitate the Soviet Union.

By 5 December the German offensive had faltered, with Bock reporting to command that capturing Moscow was now impossible. The moment of peak German vulnerability had arrived, and Zhukov decided to strike while Soviet iron was hot and the German soldiers were freezing. Contrary to German estimations, the Soviets were far from down to their last few soldiers. Throughout the month of October Zhukov had raised four new armies, and he added eight more in November. Carefully husbanding this new force, Zhukov had purposefully held 58 divisions back from the front, their very existence unknown to the Nazi regime. Yet even without these reserves the

Red Army now outnumbered the German Ostheer forces by 4 million to 3 million. This was remarkable considering the calamitous Soviet defeats suffered during the early stages of the war, when hundreds of thousands of men had either perished or been captured and marched off to concentration camps. These vast reserves of manpower would come as a nasty surprise to the Germans.

The counter began in earnest on 7 December, surprising and overwhelming German divisions across the front line. Bock's men narrowly escaped encirclement in several instances by withdrawing, despite Hitler repeatedly instructing them to stand their ground. Such was the effectiveness of Zhukov's counter that Army Group Centre was nearly destroyed in the reversal. But as the skies cleared, salvation for the Germans came in the form of the Luftwaffe, which dominated the skies and savaged the Soviet offensive. By 7 January the German lines had been pushed back around 62 miles, but the supply and fatigue problems that had so hampered their advance now plagued the Soviets, who could persist no further. A few hundred miles from Moscow, new battle lines were drawn, and the two sides settled in for another brutal round of fighting. The Battle of Moscow had been lost, but the war was far from over.







# THE RED TIDE

Despite suffering a string of catastrophic defeats the brave soldiers of the Red Army refused to yield, and in the winter of 1943 they finally broke the Wehrmacht and changed the course of the war forever





# THE DASH FOR OIL

WORDS: EDOARDO ALBERT

His hopes of a rapid victory dashed, in the summer of 1942 Hitler turned his gaze upon the oilfields of the Caucasus to fuel the Nazi war machine

**O**n 21 June 1942, a shock squad of elite soldiers from the German 336th Infantry Division fought their way through the Soviet lines and made for the crash site of a downed German plane. A report had reached the German high command that the passenger in the crashed Fieseler Fi 156 Storch, Major Joachim Reichel, had been carrying the plans for Case Blue, the German summer offensive that was due to start in a few days' time. If the Soviets had captured the plans, then that could mean disaster for the operation before it had already begun.

The squad breached the thinly held Soviet lines and, with a prisoner who claimed to have witnessed the crash, they motored to where a previous search party had identified the stricken Storch. This time, with urgent orders from German high command, the soldiers searched the area around the crash and found the bodies of two men in a shallow grave: Major Reichel and his pilot, Oberleutnant Dechant. Both men had been killed in the crash, but more to the point, there was no sign of the satchel that Major Reichel had been carrying, containing the complete Case Blue orders for XXXX Panzer Corps. The squad retrieved the bodies of Major Reichel and Oberleutnant Dechant and returned to the German lines to inform high command that, in all likelihood, the Soviets now had the complete plans for the offensive.

They did. What's more, the local Soviet troops who had discovered the crashed plane and its contents had immediately sent the satchel with the plans up the chain of command, right up to Moscow, where it was presented to Stalin himself. Having been completely fooled by the German's attack the previous year, Stalin now had the plans for the new German offensive sitting on his desk.

Stalin decided it was a trick. When the Germans had launched Operation Barbarossa in June of 1941, Stalin had clung to his belief that the main German attack would be to the south, towards the Soviets' oilfields, until it had been almost too late to prevent the fall of Moscow. Now, in 1942, Stalin

had become just as convinced that the Germans would mount a renewed attack on Moscow, so he decided that the documents were a plant and ordered that the forces he had gathered in defence of Moscow remain where they were.

Stalin was wrong again. Few leaders have made such monumental strategic errors and survived. That Stalin did so was in large part due to the unlimited numbers of men he was prepared to sacrifice in order to buy himself victory over Hitler.

As for Hitler, his own strategic objectives in the summer of 1942 were spot on. Operation Barbarossa had failed. Hitler had launched the largest land military operation in history in June

1941 with the aim of knocking the Soviet Union out of the war by the end of the year and securing its vast natural resources to fuel the Third Reich. But the assault had failed in its key strategic objectives: Stalin was still firmly in control of the Soviet Union and, although the Wehrmacht had inflicted devastating losses on the Soviets, the Red Army was still fighting. Indeed, the Red Army had even launched its own counteroffensive in the winter of 1941 after forestalling the German push on Moscow in the autumn of that year. As a result, Army Group Centre, which had come within 15 miles of the Soviet capital, had to retreat, pulling back roughly 100 miles from Moscow.







*Witness to carnage: a  
battle-weary Wehrmacht  
soldier enjoys a smoke*



*German soldiers take cover and return fire during house-to-house fighting, 1942*



By 1942 it was clear to the German high command that it was not going to be possible to knock the Soviet Union out of the war quickly. Rather, the struggle was turning into a war of attrition. There were many elements required to conduct 20th-century mechanised warfare but none was as vital as oil. Without it, Hitler's armies were not going anywhere. Before the war, Germany had imported 85 per cent of its oil, but the British naval blockade had cut off that source, leaving the German war machine critically dependent on the Romanian oilfields. But these oilfields were running at capacity, with no capacity to increase production. To feed his armies' voracious thirst for oil, Hitler needed new supplies. So as the German Army reorganised following the rigours of the winter of 1941/42, Hitler ordered the German high command to prepare a plan to capture the nearest major oilfields, which lay in the Caucasus region of the Soviet Union.

Just as the Wehrmacht could not operate without oil, neither could the Red Army. Deprive Stalin's forces of oil and the Germans would be well on the way to winning the war of attrition. Führer Directive 41 clearly laid out the strategic objectives of Case Blue: "All available forces will be concentrated on the main operations in the southern sector, with the aim of destroying the enemy before the Don, in order to secure the Caucasian oilfields and the passes through the Caucasus Mountains themselves."

### **"BLAU III, CONSISTING OF THE FIRST PANZER ARMY, WAS TO DRIVE SOUTH INTO THE CAUCASUS AND SEIZE THE OILFIELDS"**

As proposed, the first part of the operation was to destroy the Soviet forces in the region. However, their destruction was not the main goal, which remained securing the oilfields, but rather the German high command saw their elimination as necessary in order to protect the long and exposed flank of the German advance into the Caucasus. Given the prominence the city later took on in the campaign, it's remarkable that Stalingrad was not even originally seen as a primary objective. Führer Directive 41 states that "every effort will be made to reach Stalingrad itself, or at least to bring the city under fire from heavy artillery so that it will cease to be of use as an industrial or communications centre". To protect the southern thrust towards the oilfields, the German high command intended to use the rivers Don and Volga as natural boundaries to protect the flank of the Wehrmacht. Stalingrad, on the shores of the Volga, merely needed to be placed under interdict to prevent it being used as a jumping off point for Soviet counterattacks. There was no strategic necessity for the city to be taken.

Although the Germans feared that the security of their operation had been compromised by the loss of Major Reichel's plans, Hitler and the high command nevertheless decided to launch

Case Blue on 28 June. That was only a week after Reichel's plane had crashed and, even if Stalin had acted on the information, given the vast distances within the Soviet Union he would not have been able to push too many more troops south in the time available.

The German attacking forces were organised into three army groups. Blau I was given the task of protecting the northern flank, attacking from Kursk towards the city of Voronezh and then towards the River Volga.

Blau II, consisting of Paulus' 6th Army, was to advance in parallel but to the south of Blau I with the aim of reaching the River Volga at Stalingrad (although capturing the city was not an objective). Blau III, consisting of the First Panzer Army, had the job of achieving the main strategic objective, which was to drive south into the Caucasus and capture the oilfields.

Due to the severe losses the Germans had suffered in the past year, they had to bolster their forces with allied armies, in particular Hungarian, Romanian and Italian contingents. Although often brave, these forces were under-equipped and little trusted by the Germans. Another surprising feature of the plan was that although it hinged



upon speed and movement, the vast majority of the forces taking part were not fast-moving panzer divisions or even motorised brigades but rather regulation infantry divisions: the Germans simply no longer had the mechanised resources to mount a fully mobile attack.

Nevertheless, in the morning of 28 June 1942, almost exactly a year after the first German attack on the Soviet Union, the sky above the waiting Soviet lines suddenly split under the rain of artillery, while the Luftwaffe strafed and bombed Soviet strong points. To support the offensive, the German air force had moved the greater part of its aircraft south, swiftly achieving air superiority.

In the sudden fury of the assault the Soviet defences were pulverised. The motorised elements of the German Army, the spearhead of the attack, advanced so rapidly that at some junctures they were attacked by their own air force, the Luftwaffe pilots not realising that their ground forces had made so much progress.

On the Soviet side, all was in the sort of chaos that had characterised the weeks after the start of Barbarossa: communications were cut, headquarters destroyed or in retreat, with no one knowing where to fight and where to retreat and retrench. As a result, the Germans advanced swiftly, reaching the outskirts of Voronezh by 5 July. The advance had reached the banks of the River Don, one of the flanking barriers specified in the original Führer Directive, and the German high command became convinced that the Soviet forces had been broken. For his part, Stalin still feared that the forces attacking towards Voronezh might pivot north and attack Moscow from the south, so he ordered that the city be held.

The stubborn Soviet defence of Voronezh (the city did not fall until 24 July) achieved two results. First, German forces that could have been diverted to continue to attack eastward were detained in the city. Secondly, the defence of Voronezh prevented the German Army from completing the planned encirclement of Soviet armies that had been a key part of the first stage of Case Blue. Although in some disarray, the Soviets were able to retreat eastward to fight another day.

The speed of the German advance placed huge pressure on their lengthening supply trail. By 11 July some German units were forced to slow or pause their advance while waiting for supplies, particularly oil, to catch up. In other cases they had to abandon equipment, not having enough fuel to run all their machines. But encouraged by the success of the advance, Hitler and the German high command made a fateful decision: on 23 July, they decided to split Army Group South, the original *Blau III*, in half.

Army Group A was given the task of carrying out the original strategic objectives, driving south into the Caucasus to capture the oilfields. This was designated Operation Edelweiss. Army Group B, in Operation Fischreiher, was ordered to attack towards the River Volga and the city of Stalingrad. Dividing these forces put already strained German logistics under even more pressure.

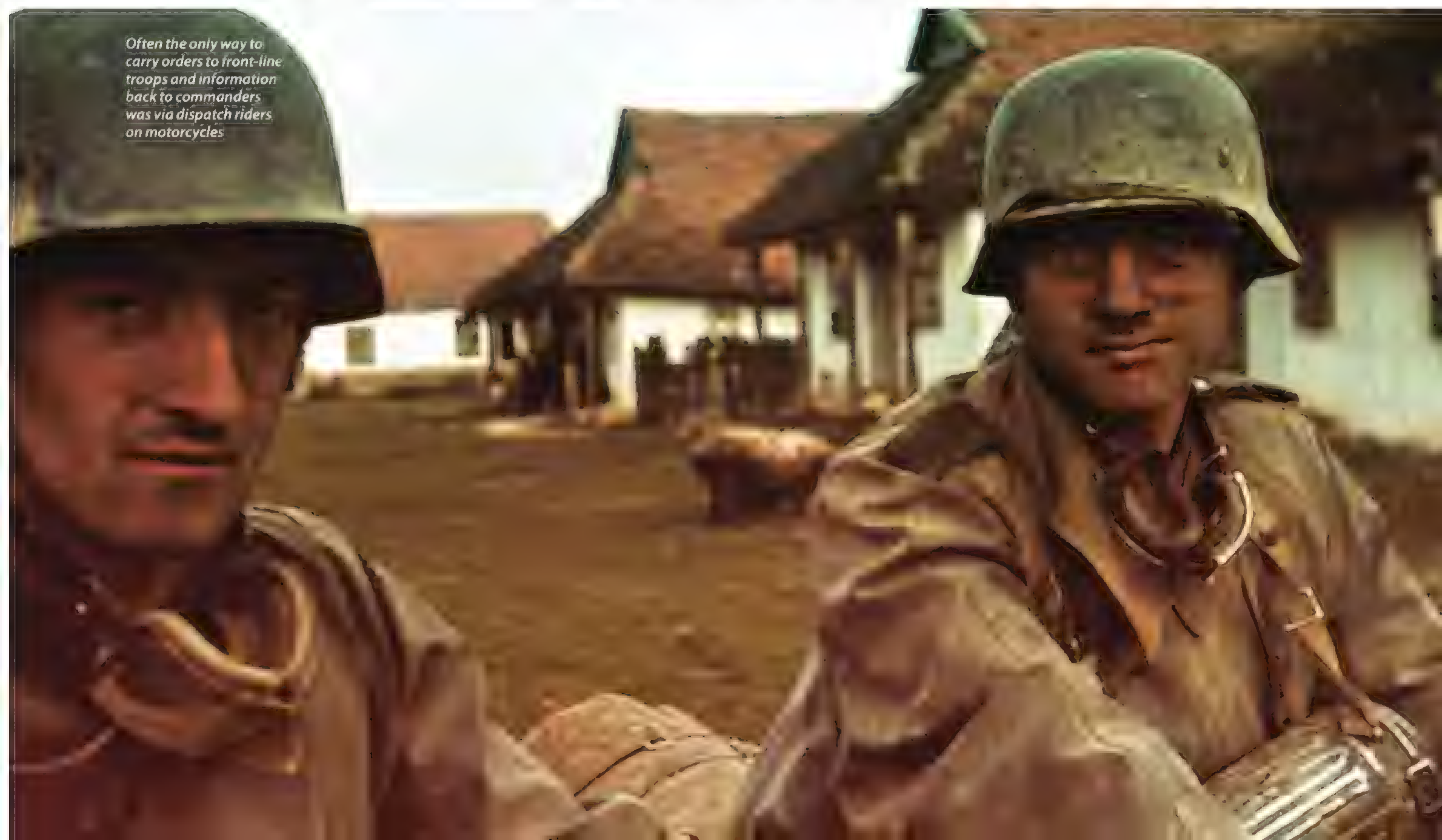
Nevertheless, Army Group A advanced quickly, rolling into the Caucasus and capturing the oilfield at Maikop on 9 August. However, the retreating Soviets had sabotaged the oilfields so thoroughly that it would take a year to get the oil flowing again. The German advance continued into the autumn, but logistical difficulties, stern Soviet

resistance and the sheer distances involved ensured that Army Group A failed to take the rest of the Caucasian oilfields before the onset of winter brought an end to further offensive operations. In an effort to deny the Soviets the use of the oil from the fields that remained tantalisingly out of their reach, Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to bomb the oil rigs and refineries at Grozny. However, the larger oilfields in Baku were beyond the range of German fighter planes and unescorted bombers would have been mauled by the Red Army Air Force.

Meanwhile, Army Group B advanced eastward towards the rivers Don and Volga. The River Don was crossed on 23 August, and on the same day advance elements of General Paulus' 6th Army reached the outskirts of Stalingrad. The city that had been, at the start of Case Blue, little more than a footnote to the whole operation, was shortly to become the cauldron of the Eastern Front.

We now know the result of that struggle, but Hitler came very close to achieving his original strategic objectives. Indeed, the Germans did succeed in capturing one of the main Soviet oilfields. If Hitler had maintained focus on his primary aim, rather than being distracted by the push east to take Stalingrad, then it is quite possible the German Army would have finished the campaigning season of 1942 in possession of the oilfields, with Stalingrad merely a minor Soviet outpost kept under observation and artillery attack. But Hitler's obsession with taking the city named for his nemesis grew, and the men of his 6th Army would ultimately pay the price. Bugged down among ruins that inhibited a force reliant on speed, Stalingrad would become their tomb.

*Often the only way to carry orders to front-line troops and information back to commanders was via dispatch riders on motorcycles*











## SEARCHING FOR THE SOVIETS

Scampering through the skeleton of a heavily bombed town, these German soldiers are going house to house looking for any Soviet survivors. This scene was typical of countless Soviet settlements, which the Germans had no qualms about razing to the ground. Ironically, their policy of terror bombing towns and cities would ultimately contribute to the Wehrmacht's downfall, as their once mobile units were forced to fight their way down alleys and streets strewn with debris, negating the speed that made them so formidable.



# VASILY CHUIKOV: DEFENDER OF STALINGRAD

WORDS: CALLUM MCKELVIE

Known for his violent temper and dangerous tactics, this Soviet commander decreed that his troops would hold Stalingrad or die trying

**I**n 1942, General Vasily Chuikov was given a nearly impossible task: defend the besieged city of Stalingrad. A tall, physically imposing man noted for having a mouthful of gold teeth, his viciousness on the battlefield was matched by his ferocity off it. He had a reputation for tenacity and an infamously short temper. His defence of the city would earn him the nickname 'General Stubbornness'.

Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov was born on 12 February 1900. Growing up in a poor family in Tsarist Russia, at 12 he left school to earn his living in a factory in Saint Petersburg. The young Chuikov quickly became an ardent follower of the revolution from its very beginning. In 1917 he was recruited to the Red Guards and in January of 1918 he joined the Red Army. A mere year later, during the Russian Civil War, the 19-year-old Chuikov showed leadership promise and was placed in command of a regiment. The young soldier was wounded several times but returned to the battlefield as soon as he could, already showing signs of the determination that would define him.

When Operation Barbarossa began, Chuikov was stationed in China working as military attache and assisting in the training of troops during the second Sino-Japanese war. Following his graduation from the Franz Military Academy in 1925 he had been offered the opportunity to specialise in the Chinese language and spent many subsequent postings in the country. However, it has been argued that his presence there in 1941 was due to his role in the disastrous Battle of Suomussalmi. The battle was a key engagement during the Winter War with Finland in 1939 and it says much that no mention of it can be found in his memoirs. In March 1942, Chuikov was recalled to Russia and soon offered an



*Chuikov examines his battle maps at a command post on the River Oder*

opportunity that would allow him to redeem his lost respect – or claim his life in the attempt.

On 11 September 1942, Chuikov arrived at a meeting to find Lieutenant General Yermenko and Commissar Nikita Khrushchev waiting for him. At this point the 62nd Army was trapped within Stalingrad's walls with little chance of reinforcements. Chuikov was offered command of the force and the chance to defend Stalingrad, but there was a catch. Under no circumstances was Chuikov allowed to surrender. The general was shown a series of maps and asked for his assessment of the situation. Calmly and coolly, he replied, "We shall hold the city or die there." The same night, Chuikov boarded a ferry carrying ammunition and headed for Stalingrad.

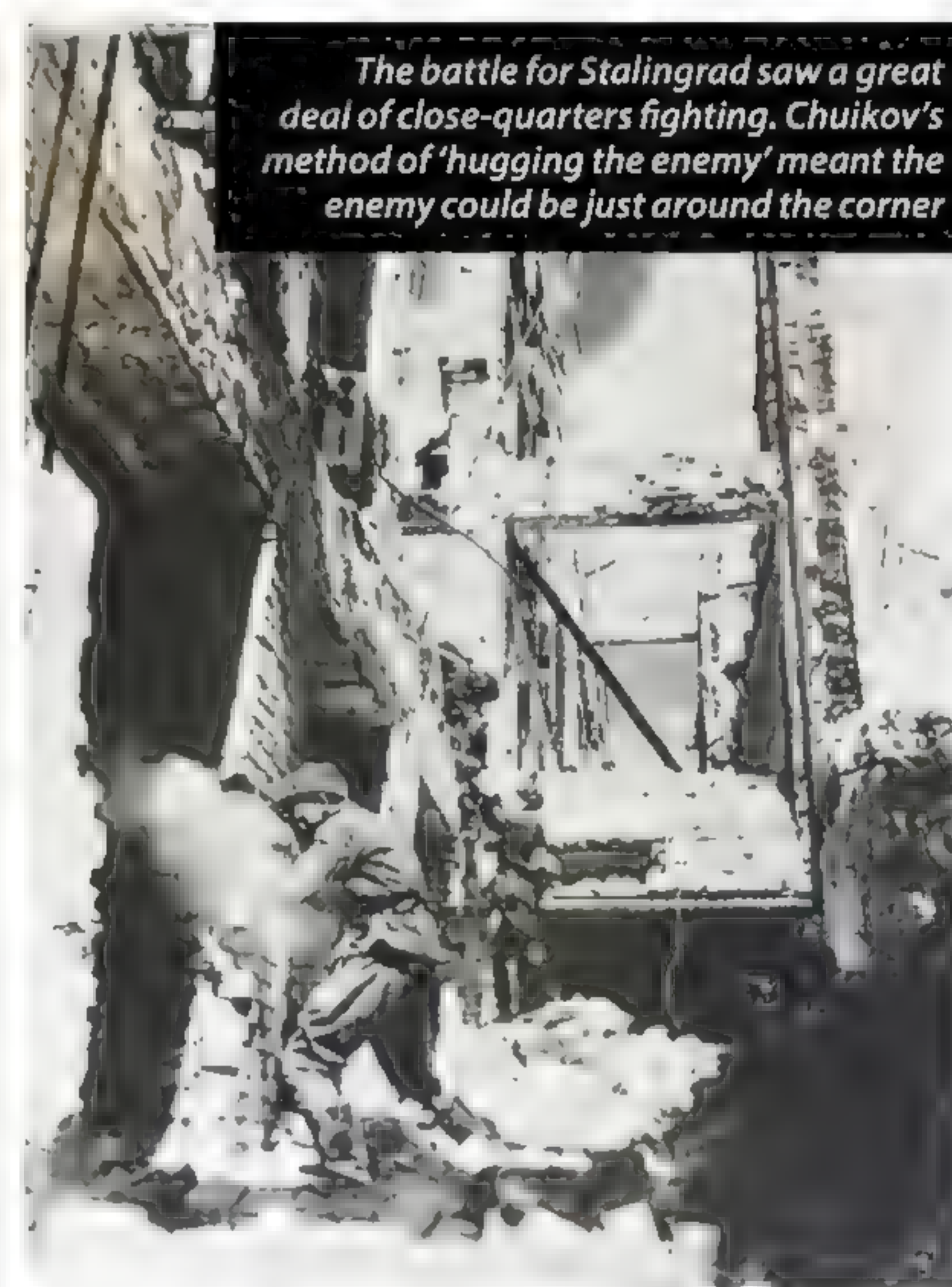
Chuikov immediately cemented himself as a ruthless leader. Shortly after arriving in the city he executed a regimental commander and commissar for fleeing their posts. Under his watch, there would be no retreat. He regularly ordered night attacks by the Red Army Air Force and by small "special assault groups", whose job was to launch deadly raids on the enemy positions. According to historian Cathal J. Nolan, these were composed of "specialists" such as "snipers, engineers, sappers and chemists".

The intention behind these unconventional tactics was to inflict both physical and mental damage; Chuikov didn't just want to tire the enemy, he wanted to terrify them, and there was no scarier prospect than being hunted at night.





Vasily Chuikov in 1953, at which point he was serving as the commander in chief of the Soviet forces in post-war Germany



The battle for Stalingrad saw a great deal of close-quarters fighting. Chuikov's method of 'hugging the enemy' meant the enemy could be just around the corner

## **"CHUIKOV WANTED TO TERRIFY THE ENEMY, AND THERE WAS NO SCARIER PROSPECT THAN BEING HUNTED AT NIGHT"**

There was one major problem, however: how to counter the Luftwaffe's air superiority? Chuikov's solution was simple but dangerous: they would 'hug' the enemy. By staying as close as possible to the German forces, the Luftwaffe's dominance of the skies would be rendered useless as their pilots would not be able to safely attack Soviet troops without endangering their own men.

While effective, this method had a terrifying side-effect. According to Rupert Matthews, it "often led to enemies being able to hear each other breathe, talk or walk without knowing exactly where their opposite numbers were".

Chuikov also ensured that snipers were commonplace and kept his infantry moving constantly, keeping the enemy on their toes. His

tactics paid off: according to Cathal J. Nolan, in September of 1942 alone some 20,000 German troops were butchered inside Stalingrad.

Chuikov himself had a few close calls during the battle. While on a reconnaissance flight over the city his plane was shot down, but despite the aircraft splitting in two upon crashing, Chuikov suffered nothing more than a bump on the head.

Following Stalingrad, Chuikov was instrumental in the final assault on Berlin. After the war he held several important posts, at one point commanding the Soviet forces in East Germany. He passed away from septicaemia on 18 March 1982, the delayed result of a wound sustained in 1920 while fighting in the Russian Civil War. Fittingly, he was laid to rest in Stalingrad, the city he had saved.



The tomb of Vasily Chuikov in Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, Russia



# THE BLOODIEST BATTLE IN HISTORY

The outcome of WWII and the fate of the Third Reich was decided in the smouldering ruins of Stalingrad

WORDS: CHARLES GINGER

**T**he pivotal battle of WWII was fought in the Soviet city of Stalingrad. While not the most strategically vital location for either side, its very name made it a point of obsession for both Hitler and Stalin. When the guns finally fell silent among the ruins in February 1943, over 1 million Wehrmacht and Soviet soldiers, not to mention innocent Soviet civilians, lay dead.

The idea of Stalingrad's capture began to germinate in Hitler's mind in April 1942, following the petering out of the Soviet counteroffensive that prevented the Wehrmacht taking Moscow. The objective was to take the city before racing on to secure the oilfields in the Caucasus beyond, simultaneously securing a vital supply for the German armies while cutting off the Soviet's access to it. With the Soviet offensive at Kharkov defeated in May, the path to Stalingrad lay open.

As General Timoschenko's battered forces retreated in the face of two German panzer armies (the 17th under Ewald von Kleist and the 6th under Friedrich Paulus) a Stalingrad Front was declared by the Soviets, which they frantically raced to fill with reserve forces from Moscow. The race was on to adequately prepare the city for the German onslaught. But it would not just be the soldiers who would be required to defend Stalingrad.

Almost 200,000 civilians were mobilised and organised into workers columns to dig anti-tank ditches up to six feet deep while army sappers laid mines. Even schoolchildren were deployed to construct earth walls around the precious petrol tanks along the Volga River. Anti-aircraft batteries were formed by young women, with guns situated on both banks of the Volga in order to defend vital positions such as the Beketovka power station

*Below: Soviet troops dash through the ruins of Stalingrad*





and the infamous Tractor Factory, which had been converted to build the much-feared T-34 tanks. Every single pair of hands would be needed if total annihilation was to be averted.

Overall command of the operation to save Stalingrad fell to the ruthless General Vasily Chuikov. Notorious for his incredibly explosive temper, Chuikov worked tirelessly to raise the morale of his beleaguered troops while instilling terror into any commanders that dared to imagine retreat. Any deserters would be shot.

Chuikov's approach to the perilous situation was simple: "Time is blood." The longer the coming battle raged, the more it would cost the Germans. Every obstacle was to be placed in their way. Even immobile tanks were dug into positions to provide fire. If Stalingrad was to be taken, it would be inch by blood-soaked inch.

### Firestorm

Having battled across the Don River on 21 August, the Germans began their assault on Stalingrad on 23 August even before they'd reached the Volga. Under the command of General von Richthofen, the entire 4th Air Fleet, comprising 1,200 aircraft (both Junkers 88 and Heinkel 111 bombers) headed for Stalingrad to ignite a biblical inferno. In a total of 1,600 sorties, Richthofen's pilots dropped approximately 1,000 tons of explosives, losing only three planes in the process. Thousands of civilians died in the carnage, still in the city due to Stalin's

refusal to evacuate them for fear of spreading mass panic. Wooden houses were reduced to ash as apartment blocks were either gutted or collapsed entirely. By indiscriminately carpet-bombing the entire city, the Luftwaffe hit the hospital, waterworks and telephone lines, as well as bombing the petrol tanks lining the river, sending flames 1,500 feet into the blackened sky.

With what was to become a lengthy bombardment now underway, the 16th Panzer Division surged across the steppe towards the city. Despite the valiant efforts of the anti-aircraft batteries, who rained 37mm (1.5in) shells down upon the invaders, the panzer crews pressed on, aided by Stuka aircraft. By the afternoon of the 23rd they reached the Volga.

Confident that such a pulverising would have broken the Soviet's will and ability to resist, the Germans anticipated a relatively swift victory. But in a dark twist of irony, they had actually helped to sow the seeds of their own downfall. The churned-up remains of Stalingrad would prove to be a cramped killing field in which snipers and close-quarters fighting ruled. This was no place for the rapid, sweeping manoeuvres favoured by the German invaders.

In the days that followed the terror bombing, General Hoth's forces slowly trudged forwards, pushing the Soviet 64th Army back. Emboldened by the relatively weak Soviet resistance in the lead-up to the assault, Paulus decided to send his

men straight into the fray upon their arrival instead of allowing them to rest. As weary German soldiers fed into the rubble-strewn streets, so too did fresh Soviet reinforcements.

The situation facing the Soviets was utterly dire, so desperate in fact, that as their men ran towards the enemy, machine gun posts were set up behind them. Their choice was clear: die fighting or die retreating. The fact that they had to rely on supplies shipped across the Volga under heavy German fire didn't help either.

Working in tandem with their pilot colleagues, the panzers continued to fight their way through the city, all the while conscious of the vulnerability of their tanks in the narrow streets. By 31 August the Germans were at the Stalingrad-Morozask railway. Paulus now firmly believed that the Soviet 62nd and 64th armies could be divided and finished off.

The arrival of Marshal Georgy Zhukov two days earlier had again revealed the scale of the task facing the Soviets. Morale was collapsing under the strain of the German aerial bombardment, with one divisional commander resorting to lining up his men and shooting every tenth one until his gun ran out. Just as the Soviets were preparing to unleash a counterattack in an attempt to stem the panzer advance, Zhukov began imploring Stalin to delay it.

The marshal discovered the troops assigned to the job were poorly equipped, low on ammunition





and predominantly made up of old reservists. Yet despite the obvious flaws in the Red Army, Stalin became increasingly nervous, citing the encroachment of German tanks as the reason that any delay could prove fatal. Zhukov did eventually succeed in gaining an extra two days, but they made little difference, for the advance that proceeded was a short-lived one.

Fightback

The 1st Guards Army only managed to push on a few miles into the Russian steppe, while the 24th Army literally found itself back at square one, having totally failed to gain any ground. However, the attack had not been completely in vain. It had forced Paulus to divert his reserve forces just as the shattered remains of the 62nd and 64th armies were pushed back to the perimeters of the city. The Germans had paid heavily, losing six battalion commanders in a single day and seeing many companies decimated, some left with as few as 40 men. From grenades to Molotov cocktails, the Soviets used all available

means. Many rushed into the fray without weapons, forced to wait until a comrade fell before taking their rifle. It's no surprise that the life expectancy for a soldier arriving in the city was less than 24 hours. With fewer than 40,000 fighters left to confront the 6th Army and 4th Panzer Army, the Germans believed that it was simply a matter of time before Stalingrad would fall. Following a summit with Hitler in his Vinnitsa headquarters, Paulus unleashed the next major assault on 12 September. With yet another artillery bombardment and bombing attack having pounded the city beforehand, the Wehrmacht began to make progress, fighting their way towards the Mamayev Kurgan, a mound overlooking the Volga, also known as Hill 102 on account of its height in metres. Soldiers pressed on to the railway station as Hoth's panzer and infantry troops aimed for the grain elevator. Stalin ordered that men be sent across the Volga to secure the west bank. The 13th Guards Division lined up to await the journey under German fire.

Those that reached the bank leapt from the boats to rush the enemy, knowing that the slightest delay meant death. Close-quarter combat ensued as reinforcements poured in from both sides. The hill was strategically vital; its loss would allow the Germans to control the entire river, across which all of the Soviet supplies had to travel.

Factories of death

The further the Germans advanced the stiffer the resistance they encountered. Every single building had to be fought for, with numerous tales of grossly outnumbered men holding out against wave upon wave of attacks. One of the most well-known examples is Pavlov's House, which is said to have cost the Germans more men than the entire thrust into France. In such encounters flamethrowers proved very effective, but it was the snipers, such as the famed Vasily Zaitsev, that reigned supreme among the rubble. Appropriately, the German name for this merciless fighting was Rattenkrieg (rat war). By early October the Germans began their assault on the factory district to the north of the city. Many of these installations, including the Red October Complex and the Tractor Factory, had been turned into fortresses, and these changed hands many times as the battle ebbed and flowed. In some instances, the panzers resorted to ramming the buildings to gain entry. The key positions were finally in German hands come the end of October, but the price paid for them was nothing short of catastrophic. The last heave of the attack has been curtailed by a rain of Katyusha and mortar fire. Just as winter approached the Wehrmacht found itself running out of steam, bled almost dry. A final attempt at a decisive breakthrough came on 11 November. As the Luftwaffe obliterated the factory chimneys, infantry seized buildings from the enemy, only to relinquish them shortly after. Burning tanks littered the streets as the Soviets dug in, some down to their last rounds. Such was their determination, a band of 15 men held off a thrust towards the petrol tanks on the Volga. The tenacity of these courageous men led the Germans

Lying in a doorway, a Soviet soldier mans a Tsarist-era PM M1910 heavy machine gun



TIMELINE

<b>1942</b>						
<b>BOMBING RAID</b> On the third anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Germans pulverise Stalingrad from the air, killing thousands of people. <b>23 AUGUST 1942</b>	<b>WEHRMACHT ON THE VOLGA</b> Such is the ferocity of the German assault, Hitler's forces gaze out over the Volga (not the buildings that used to block the view of it) by sunset. <b>23 AUGUST 1942</b>	<b>STALINGRAD-MOROZAST RAILWAY</b> The Germans press on, fighting bitterly to reach the key railway line, forcing the desperate Soviets back. <b>31 AUGUST 1942</b>	<b>SOVIET COUNTERATTACK</b> The Soviets launch a doomed counterattack in early September, gaining little ground but sparing the remnants of their 62nd and 64th armies from the German advance. <b>SEPTEMBER 1942</b>	<b>FRESH GERMAN OFFENSIVE</b> Paulus begins a new offensive by pounding the city with artillery and aerial bombardments. His men then reach the Mamayev Kurgan. <b>12 SEPTEMBER</b>	<b>BATTLE FOR THE MAMAYEV KURGAN</b> Aware that the loss of this strategically vital hill would hand the Germans total control of the Volga, Stalin orders troops be sent over to retake it. A bloody struggle for Hill 102 begins. <b>12 SEPTEMBER ONWARDS</b>	<b>FIGHTING IN THE FACTORIES</b> As the Germans continue their march further into the city they reach the industrial district. Fighting erupts as the Soviets struggle to hold key buildings, including the Tractor Factory. <b>4 OCTOBER</b>





Bombing raids and their attendant firestorms left Stalingrad a pulverised ruin, but the city fought on

to believe that they were fighting “creatures”. And it would be these seemingly superhuman warriors that would soon wreak an almighty revenge.

Thanks to the movement of industry back beyond the Volga, Soviet factories were continuing to produce an immense amount of weaponry. Some estimates place monthly tank production, including the much-feared T-34, at 2,200. Hitler not only underestimated his enemy’s industrial capacity, he also genuinely believed them to be exhausted and at the very end of their strength.

This hubris made the thunderclap of Operation Uranus all the more stunning. The supposedly spent Soviets had in fact been secretly amassing

a gargantuan force with which to launch a staggeringly ambitious flanking attack of brutal simplicity. A main assault force would set off over 100 miles west of Stalingrad, while another horde of troops struck out from south of the Don River as an armoured thrust launched from the south of the charred city.

On the morning of 19 November, a huge Soviet bombardment opened fire as the snow fell. The Germans, supported by Italian and Romanian troops, didn’t know what hit them. The encirclement of the 6th Army had begun, and it would culminate in its destruction. Hitler’s refusal to allow Paulus’ men to retreat, combined

with Göring’s insistence that the Luftwaffe could keep the entrapped soldiers supplied, cemented their doom. By the first days of February 1943, Stalingrad was silent.

The horrific battle for the city is the bloodiest in human history and bore witness to animalistic fighting. In the words of Winston Churchill, “Stalingrad was the end of the beginning”. It proved to be a traumatic reversal from which the Wehrmacht never fully recovered. The Red Army would march for Berlin. With over two years of conflict ahead, the outcome of WWII had already been settled in the ruins of Stalin’s city, the fate of Hitler’s Third Reich permanently sealed.

#### GERMANS ATTEMPT FINAL BREAKTHROUGH

Running out of supplies and shattered by the fighting, Paulus attempts to finally end the battle. The Germans force their way forwards, taking many buildings from the Soviets but failing to deliver a knockout blow.

11 NOVEMBER

#### THE SNIPER MOVEMENT

As the anniversary of the October Revolution nears a cult of ‘sniperism’ begins to emerge, with Vasily Zaitsev at its head. Zaitsev, who killed 225 enemy soldiers during the battle, begins to train young snipers.

MID-OCTOBER

#### THE FALL OF THE FACTORIES

After almost a month, the Germans finally have overall control of the area. However, Soviet defenders remain in the vicinity, with some of them even left inside the Tractor Factory.

LATE OCTOBER

#### OPERATION URANUS

With approximately a million men amassed over 100 miles from Stalingrad, the Soviets begin a huge encirclement operation, hoping to trap the Germans in the city and out on the steppe.

19 NOVEMBER

#### THE NET BEGINS TO CLOSE

Paulus is horrified to hear that the approaching Soviet forces now threaten both flanks of his 6th Army.

21 NOVEMBER

#### A PANICKED WITHDRAWAL

Paulus swiftly abandons his headquarters as Soviet tanks approach. General Walther von Seydlitz orders two infantry divisions to burn their supplies and retreat from Stalingrad.

21 NOVEMBER

#### HITLER DOOMS THE 6TH ARMY

With hope of a breakout fading fast, Hitler issues an order to the trapped 6th Army that, “Surrender is out of the question. Troops must fight on to the end.”

22 JANUARY 1943

#### THE 6TH ARMY SURRENDERS

Paulus’ trapped forces begin to surrender. Approximately 91,000 troops are taken into captivity. Only 5,000 ever made it back to Germany.

31 JANUARY – 2 FEBRUARY 1943

1943









## STALKING STALINGRAD

Surrounded by an apocalyptic wasteland that was once the bustling city of Stalingrad, these German troops have been tasked with mopping up pockets of Soviet resistance. At one point in control of 90 per cent of the city, the Germans suffered dearly for every inch. Such was the determination of the Soviet defenders that the Germans often found they occupied one floor of a factory or apartment block and Soviet troops held the floor above. At such close quarters many men on both sides resorted to using knives and bayonets to butcher the enemy in a totally merciless struggle.



# THE DEFENCE OF PAVLOV'S HOUSE

Faced with a relentless German onslaught, one courageous platoon decided to take a stand, turning an apartment block into a fortress

**T**here were countless acts of heroism during the savage Battle of Stalingrad, but one of the most famous is the dogged, two-month-long Soviet resistance at 'Pavlov's House', a fortified apartment block in the centre of the city. Seized by Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, the four-storey building presented the Germans with a formidable obstacle, one they threw hundreds of troops at for 60 days without success. Synonymous with the general Soviet refusal to surrender to the invaders, Vasily Chuikov would later claim that the Germans lost more men trying to take Pavlov's House than they did when they stormed Paris in 1940.



*Yakov Fedotovitch Pavlov became a hero after his platoon recaptured and defended a building that came to be known as 'Pavlov's House'*





### **1 THE GERMANS ATTACK AN APARTMENT BUILDING**

On 23 September 1942, German soldiers attack a four-storey apartment block in the centre of Stalingrad. The building is parallel to the west bank of the Volga River and overlooks '9th January Square', a large public square that is named after the Bloody Sunday Massacre of 1905.

### **2 SERGEANT PAVLOV SEIZES THE BUILDING**

When the apartment block is attacked, a platoon of Soviet soldiers from the 13th Guards Rifle Division is ordered to take and defend it. They are led by Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, a low-ranking NCO who is serving as the acting platoon commander as the unit's lieutenant and senior sergeants have all been killed or wounded. The assault on the building is successful, although only four men out of a 30-man platoon survive the attack.

### **3 PAVLOV STRIKES STRATEGIC GOLD**

Pavlov surveys the situation and finds the house is strategically well placed for a defence. It is positioned on a cross street and gives the defenders a clear line of sight for over half a mile to the north, south and west of the city. After two days he is reinforced and resupplied, bringing his under-strength unit up to 25 men.

### **4 DIGGING IN**

Joseph Stalin issues Order Number 227 to the troops in Stalingrad: "Not one step back." Pavlov takes this to heart and orders the building to be surrounded with four layers of barbed wire and minefields. He also sets up machine-gun posts in every available window facing the square as well as anti-tank rifles and mortars.

### **5 TANK DESTRUCTION FROM THE ROOF**

Pavlov discovers that a PTRS-41 anti-tank rifle is very effective against German tanks when it is mounted on the roof. When tanks approach within 25 metres of the building, their thin turret armour becomes exposed to anti-tank fire from above but they are unable to elevate their weapons high enough to retaliate. Pavlov reportedly destroys almost a dozen tanks using this tactic.

### **6 INTERNAL LOGISTICS AND SUPPORT**

In order to communicate properly, Pavlov's men breach the walls in the basement and upper floors of the building and also dig a communications trench to Soviet positions outside. Supplies are brought in via the trench or by boats crossing the Volga despite German air raids and shelling.

### **7 A HARSH EXISTENCE**

Despite the creation of the communications trench, the soldiers (and civilians who live in the basement) constantly suffer from a shortage of food and especially water. There are no beds and the soldiers try to sleep on insulation wool torn off pipes.

### **8 A RELENTLESS BOMBARDMENT**

The Germans continually shoot at the building day and night but each time soldiers or tanks cross the square to close in Pavlov's men unleash a hail of machine-gun and anti-tank fire from the basement, windows and roof top, inflicting large casualties and forcing the Germans to retreat.



# ANGEL OF DEATH

Meet the Soviet sniper whose feats – whether real or not – inspired both a nation and a Hollywood blockbuster

WORDS: SCOTT REEVES

Vasily Zaitsev knew he was an accurate shot from an early age. His grandfather taught him to hunt in the mountains, and Zaitsev's first trophy was a wolf that he killed with a single-shot rifle at the age of 12. It was so heavy that he could barely carry it home. Fourteen years later, Zaitsev was serving as a clerk in the Pacific Fleet on the far side of Russia when Adolf Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa. Zaitsev requested a front-line posting and arrived in time for the Battle of Stalingrad. It was a wise move – Zaitsev proved a dab hand with his standard-issue Mosin-Nagant rifle, quickly dispatching 32 enemy soldiers. However, it was one particular feat of marksmanship that drew the attention of his superior officers. At a distance of 800 metres, Zaitsev killed a Nazi officer

with a single perfect shot that left his comrades speechless. When two German soldiers came to the aid of their fallen comrade, Zaitsev downed them both with two more shots. Realising they had a skilled shooter on their hands, Zaitsev was given an optical sight by his superiors and told to continue the good work.

Sniping was a dangerous pursuit. Aside from pure marksmanship, it required infinite patience, a steady nerve and great courage. A sniper had to seek out the best position to shoot from – a position called a 'nest' – and observe the enemy. Often, the first opportunity to shoot wasn't the best. It might be prudent to wait for a better target or a more reliable shot. But there was the constant danger of discovery, especially since the best nests were frequently in vulnerable positions with minimal back up.

Zaitsev excelled among the burned-out buildings of Stalingrad. He buried himself in deep snow. He hid in water pipes. He used rubble to disguise his shooting positions. In two bloody months he killed 225 enemy soldiers from concealed positions and was heralded by Soviet command. As his reputation grew, Zaitsev was given command of multiple snipers and told to defend open areas that were susceptible to German attack. He developed a strategy in which three snipers worked together from three different positions, each supported by an observer. The tactic, known as "sixes", became the standard operating procedure for Soviet snipers.

Posthumous fame came in 2001 with the release of *Enemy at the Gates*, a Hollywood film based on a sniper duel between Zaitsev and the head of a German sniper school brought to Stalingrad to





Jude Law played Vasily Zaitsev in 'Enemy at the Gates', a 2001 film based on his deeds



## “HIS STUDENTS WERE LATER CREDITED WITH 6,000 KILLS BEFORE THE WAR CAME TO AN END”

eliminate the top Soviet sniper. Whether this exact contest took place is debated by historians – the duel may have been invented by propagandists – but it’s firmly entrenched in Russian folklore. According to the Soviet version of the story, Zaitsev and his observer spent several days working out where the skilled German sniper was shooting from. They got him to reveal his position by raising a Soviet helmet a few inches, giving their enemy a tempting target. The German took his shot and foolishly left his nest to check his kill. That gave Zaitsev the chance to despatch him – which he did with a bullet between the German’s eyes.

Even if the *Enemy at the Gates* duel is the product of overactive imaginations, Zaitsev is credited with killing 11 German snipers at Stalingrad. His contribution to the defence of the city came to an end when a mortar attack damaged Zaitsev’s eyesight. By the time he was recovered, the Germans had been pushed back

from Stalingrad. Zaitsev, now recognised as a Hero of the Soviet Union, returned to the front line, but he was now primarily a tutor to a cadre of skilled young snipers. He urged patience in his young charges, often ordering them to get into position and do nothing but watch the enemy through their scopes, insisting that the most important skill in sniping was the ability to observe and understand the movements of your enemy. His students were later credited with 6,000 kills before the war came to an end.

Zaitsev survived the war. Around 250 enemy soldiers did not thanks to his ruthless shooting. The Angel of Death himself died on 15 December 1991 at the age of 76. Eleven days later, the Soviet Union he fought for was dissolved by Mikhail Gorbachev. Zaitsev’s wish was to be buried in Stalingrad. By the time he was interred with full military honours, the city had lost its Soviet-era name and was now Volgograd.

Vasily Zaitsev scored most of his kills with a standard-issue rifle and optical scope







# ZHUKOV'S SCYTHES OF VENGEANCE

*General Georgy Zhukov was the mastermind behind Uranus, the November 1942 operation that brought about the destruction of the German 6th Army*

WORDS: MARC DESANTIS

How a resurgent Red Army encircled the German 6th Army at Stalingrad and altered the course of the war on the Eastern Front





**"THE GERMANS HAD REACHED THE VOLGA RIVER, BESIDE WHICH SAT THE INDUSTRIAL CITY OF STALINGRAD, AND THEIR PANZERS WERE ROLLING INTO THE CAUCASUS"**

## ZHUKOV'S SCYTHES OF VENGEANCE

**B**arbarossa had failed. The 1941 German invasion, Adolf Hitler's bid to conquer the Soviet Union, had been repulsed at the very gates of Moscow that December by a renewed Red Army composed of fresh divisions drawn from Siberia. Overextended, the Germans held back the ferocious Soviet counteroffensive across the brutal winter of 1941–42, with the Luftwaffe resupplying some 75,000 German troops encircled in the Demyansk Pocket. The Eastern Front stabilised by spring 1942, and despite the heavy losses inflicted on them by the Soviets, the strategic initiative at the beginning of the 1942 campaigning season still lay squarely with the German invaders.

Neither Joseph Stalin, the ruthless Soviet leader, nor Stavka, the USSR's high command, anticipated that the upcoming German offensive for 1942 would strike in the south. Instead, they foresaw that the main blow would again fall on Moscow, in the central part of the Eastern Front, just as it had in the previous year.

Hitler, however, whose view of war was heavily coloured by economic thinking, had set his sights on the oilfields of the Caucasus as the primary objective of 1942. The oil obtained from them would be crucial to the German war machine.

The 1942 German offensive, codenamed Operation Blau, began on 28 June. German Army Group A would head for the Caucasian oil wells, while Army Group B would take control of territory up to the line of the southern Volga River.

The Germans rushed forward, seizing huge tracts of Soviet territory. However, relatively few Soviet prisoners were taken on this occasion compared to the enormous captures of the previous year. Having learned a bitter lesson during several defeats in 1941, the Soviets were withdrawing, careful to avoid being encircled by Hitler's surging panzer spearheads.

Soon the Germans had reached the Volga River, beside which sat the industrial city of Stalingrad, and elsewhere their panzers were rolling into the Caucasus. The Germans, however, were spread very thinly in the vastness of the south Russian steppe. All told, German Army Group B found itself occupying a frontage some 400 miles in length, and the forces available to it were woefully insufficient to guard it effectively.

### Setting the trap

The Soviets spotted an opportunity. This was the genesis of Uranus, a military operation that would alter the course of the war on the Eastern Front. General Georgy Zhukov and the Red Army's Chief of the General Staff Aleksandr Vasilevsky, met with Stalin on 12 September, not long before the German 6th Army was about to begin its first assault on Stalingrad.

At the meeting, Zhukov had to account for the failures of several assaults against Axis positions north of Stalingrad. Zhukov explained that the attacks had not been supplemented with enough tanks and artillery. He asked for more

troops, including many more tanks, howitzers and warplanes. Stalin considered the request but was not convinced to the point of granting it. He told Zhukov and Vasilevsky to come up with a more detailed plan. The next day, the two generals returned with an audacious proposal. Stalingrad was to be held by as few soldiers (from the Soviet 62nd Army) as required to keep the Germans tied down in its streets. In the meantime, powerful Soviet armies would be assembled for a major counteroffensive. When the necessary preparations had been completed, two pincers would strike at the weak Axis flanks to the north and south of the city.

The intuition of the Soviet planners was sound. As it would turn out, as the Germans became evermore stuck in the quagmire of Stalingrad, responsibility for flank security either side of the city was delegated to their less-effective Romanian and Italian allies. Such soldiers would prove to be nowhere near as formidable opponents as their German counterparts.

Each Soviet pincer was to break through a sector held by Romanian troops of indifferent combat strength. They would then meet on the far side of Stalingrad, trapping the German 6th Army in a giant encirclement. Out of supplies and with no reinforcements, the invaders would wither and die.

Stalin recommended that the attacks begin closer to either side of Stalingrad. This way, he reasoned, the pincers would not have to travel as far to link up to complete the encirclement. Zhukov, however, pointed out that if the Soviet forces started out nearer to Stalingrad, the 6th Army troops there would have an easier time redeploying to parry the twin Soviet thrusts.

Presented with this cogent counterargument, Stalin consented to the nascent plan, codenamed Uranus. Meeting again on 28 September, the trio discussed a more fully developed battle plan. The northern pincer force would be the more powerful of the pair because it would have to traverse a longer distance than the southern. Also, the Romanian 3rd Army in the northern sector was backed up by the German 4th Panzer Corps, a formation of considerable combat power, so more troops would be needed to deal with the enemy in this area.

Zhukov also realised that it would simply not do to hurl half-trained Red Army conscripts against the battle-hardened Germans. To ensure that the men to be committed to Uranus would know their jobs, he sent his green units to other sectors of the Eastern Front to be blooded in real combat.

The Germans were distracted by these movements of troops, since their presence signalled Soviet designs on other parts of the front, not the Stalingrad area. Ironically, the Soviets would also benefit from the ineffectual nature of the attacks that they had made against the Germans north of the city earlier in the year. Their repeated failures had convinced their opponents that the Red Army could not possibly carry out an operation on the scale of Operation Uranus. As a result, the Germans had no idea what was coming.



## The Soviets muster

To carry out this daring encirclement, a new 'front', as the Soviets termed a group of their armies, was formed. Under the command of General Nikolai Vatutin, the Southwest Front was composed of the 5th Tank Army, 1st Guards Army and the 21st Army. It would form the northern pincer.

General Konstantin Rokossovsky was placed in command of the Don Front, a force that held a stretch of the line running northward from Stalingrad. Included in the Don Front were the 24th, 65th and 66th armies.

## PRISONERS OF STALIN

### Axis prisoners endured dreadful conditions in Soviet captivity

Around 250,000 German and Axis soldiers were taken prisoner by the victorious Soviets over the bleak winter of 1942-43, either during December's abortive German relief attempt, Operation Wintergewitter, or upon the fall of the Stalingrad cauldron in February. The once-invincible Germans who walked into captivity were painted by one observer as "ghosts in rags". Lice-ridden, thirsting, famished and freezing, thousands were forced to undertake gruelling death marches in which many perished in the snow.

Other men were trundled by rail to over 20 prisoner-of-war camps. Aboard one train on its way to Uzbekistan, many soldiers were driven mad by hunger and beat one another to death for the meagre scraps of food that their captors flung among them.

Once at the camps, German soldiers were beset ever further by bottomless hunger. Cannibalism, that ancient and horrific crime of desperation, emerged as a result. Pieces of frozen human flesh were plopped into boiling water and then passed around as 'camel meat'.

Survival among the prisoners proved to be largely a matter of rank. Ordinary enlisted men perished in droves, with 95 per cent of their number dying. Among junior officers, that percentage fell to 55 per cent, while those of higher rank, the senior officers of the 6th Army, saw only five per cent of their number die.

These men had eaten relatively well in the final days in Stalingrad prior to surrender, whereas the common soldiers had long been subsisting on a near-starvation diet. The Soviets also treated the higher German officers better, thus improving their odds of living through the ordeal of captivity.

Some German troops were not sent off from Stalingrad but were instead kept in place to help rebuild. Typhus, however, tore through the ruins of the gutted city, felling many of those who had remained.

There would be few happy stories among those who became prisoners of the Soviets. Most would die as prisoners, never seeing their distant homelands again.

Stalingrad itself, and the line running southward from it, was held by Stalingrad Front under General Andrei Yeremenko. His task was to oversee the southern pincer movement, which was to be executed by the 51st and 57th armies.

The Soviets went to great lengths to hide their upcoming operation. Their term for their deception effort was 'maskirovka' (disguise), and this encompassed camouflage, deception, disguise and extensive operational security measures. Soviet misdirection resulted in Luftwaffe aeroplanes paying attention to 17 fake bridges thrown over the Don River so that they would miss the five genuine structures to be used by Vatutin's Southwest Front when Uranus began.

While preparations for Uranus ran their course, the Red Army's wireless traffic volume in the region was purposefully lowered to lull the Germans into believing that nothing was amiss. Additionally, much Soviet movement was conducted at night. Yeremenko's Stalingrad Front actually moved more than 160,000 troops and over 14,000 tanks and other vehicles over the southern Volga River in total darkness. By morning, each group of newly inserted troops was heavily camouflaged to escape detection by German reconnaissance units.

All in all, though the maskirovka did not hide Soviet preparations completely, it did shield the size of the forces that were being built up to the north and south of Stalingrad and therefore obscured the titanic scope of Uranus. This was a remarkable achievement, as the pending operation was indeed gigantic. For Uranus, the Soviets gathered around 1.1 million troops, almost 900 tanks, over 13,000 artillery pieces and more than 1,100 aircraft.

## Uranus begins

The great Uranus offensive began at 7.30 a.m. on 19 November with a massive artillery barrage that lasted for over an hour. When the guns fell silent, Soviet forces of the Don and Southwest fronts roared into battle along a 200-mile stretch of snow-covered ground. Bursting out of the Don River bridgehead at Serafimovich, Vatutin's 5th Tank Army of Southwest Front smashed into the Romanian 3rd Army's left flank, while its companion, the Soviet 1st Guards Army, took on the Italian 8th Army.

At the same time, the Soviet 21st Army surged out of the Don River bridgehead at Kletskaya and struck the Romanian 3rd Army in its right flank. The



*Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, commander of the 6th Army, glumly surrendering to the Red Army*



*Marshal Erich von Manstein, commander of Army Group Don, tried and failed to reach the 6th Army trapped in Stalingrad*



stunned Romanians were poorly equipped and unready to meet the Soviet onslaught. The Soviets quickly ploughed through them. Meanwhile, Rokossovsky's 24th and 66th armies of Don Front went on the attack in the gap between the Volga and Don rivers.

The debut of Uranus fixed German eyes squarely on the northern sector, and General Friedrich Paulus, the 6th Army's commander in Stalingrad, was ordered by Army Group B, 6th Army's parent formation, to send his panzer units west to protect his supply lines. Now the forces of Yeremenko's Stalingrad Front exploded out of their starting positions in the southern sector. The Romanian 4th Army and German 4th Panzer Army buckled under the Soviet assault, and their battered remnants hurried westward.

All was chaos as the scything Soviet spearheads punched through the disintegrating Axis defences. By 23 November, just four days after the beginning of Uranus, the northern and southern Soviet pincers had linked up at Sovetsky, near the crucial rail-crossing over the Don River at Kalach, which had itself been captured by the Soviets the day before. The Uranus trap had clamped shut.

Stranded within the Stalingrad 'Kessel' (cauldron), surrounded by enemies hellbent on revenge, were some 250,000 Axis troops (some estimates range as high as 300,00), all of whom would shortly be running low on food, fuel and ammunition unless they could be promptly resupplied. They never would be.

## Fortress Stalingrad

On 22 November, Paulus communicated by wireless that the 6th Army had been surrounded.

In his response, Hitler acknowledged Paulus' predicament but did not give him permission to attempt a breakout. It would never be forthcoming. Two days later, on the morning of 24 November, Paulus received another message from the Führer. There would be no thought of a breakout from the city on the Volga, which Hitler had declared to be a 'festung' (fortress). The 6th Army was to hold 'Fortress Stalingrad' at all costs. Its fate had been sealed.

Hitler had been promised by master of the Luftwaffe Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring that his airmen could supply the trapped soldiers inside the Stalingrad pocket with enough supplies to keep them going. The 6th Army said it needed 700 tons per day to remain operational. Göring told Hitler that his transport planes could deliver 600 a day, but his arrogant assurances would amount to little. The Luftwaffe did not have nearly enough transport aircraft to accomplish this, and this figure did not take into account the bad weather or the predictable Soviet interference.

Yet Hitler had misplaced faith in the Luftwaffe's ability to create an air bridge for the besieged garrison in Stalingrad. Here, his memory of the survival of the German troops trapped in the Demyansk Pocket earlier in 1942, when German transport planes had sustained the encircled men, worked against the 6th Army. Conditions on the Eastern Front had changed drastically in the intervening months. Enemy fighter planes, flying in enormous numbers for a rebuilt Red Air Force, shot down many German transports as they lumbered towards Stalingrad.

The Luftwaffe never came close to 600 tons of supplies a day and managed to deliver only half

that amount on just one occasion. Over time, the 6th Army's few airfields would be eliminated by the steadily encroaching Red Army.

Another impediment to rescuing the 6th Army emerged elsewhere on the Eastern Front. Uranus was not the only major operation launched by the Soviets that autumn. In the central region of the Eastern Front, before Moscow, a concurrent Soviet operation, Mars, aimed to reduce the Rzhev salient, encircle the German 9th Army and remove the pressure on the USSR's capital.

Mars would turn out to be a costly failure that was subsequently largely ignored by Soviet-era histories of the war, but it did have at least one beneficial effect for the Red Army. The sheer weight of Soviet arms hurled at the Germans in front of Moscow pinned down large numbers of German troops who could not be sent south to the relief of the 6th Army in Stalingrad.

Paulus' soldiers would never be saved. The relief attempt mounted by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's Army Group Don that December, Operation Wintergewitter (Winter Storm), failed to break through the Red Army's cordon around Stalingrad. Paulus himself had never received permission from Hitler to make a breakout attempt of any kind, and even if he had, his men, weakened by starvation and freezing, would likely have been cut down by the Soviets if they had ever tried to flee the Kessel through the deep snow on foot, over dozens of miles, to German lines.

Instead, they would surrender en masse to the triumphant Soviets the next February, to be marched across the snow-covered steppe into ignominious captivity. Most would perish. The tide of the war on the Eastern Front had turned.



# OPERATION LITTLE SATURN

WORDS: ARISA LOOMBA

Desperate to exploit the success of Uranus, the Soviets began an operation that would prove to be a game of tactical opportunism and devastating losses



**T**he region of southern Russia was central to Hitler's overall strategy to conquer the USSR. He planned to take Stalingrad before cutting off Soviet oil supplies in the Caucasus.

To this end, Hitler formed two separate armies, Group A (to the south) and Group B (to the north), tasked with carrying out this plan. Beginning in the summer of 1942, the Germans advanced rapidly through the Soviet Union, and it seemed as though they would be able to cut the USSR off from its southern territories, as well as crucial supply lines from Persia.

As the Germans quickly advanced, though, supply trains carrying resources, fuel and manpower could not keep up, and they began to run low, leading to the decision to head towards Stalingrad and cut off supply shippings on the Volga River. Following months of battle, the vast majority of Stalingrad had been taken by the Germans, despite huge casualties and a now highly overstretched army. This set the tone for impending disaster. Little did they realise, the harsh Russian winter would lead to more difficulty than they could have imagined.

Following the success of the Soviets' Operation Uranus against Army Group B in November 1942 (which had entrapped approximately 250,000 Axis troops of the German 6th Army and 4th Panzer Army in Stalingrad), a plan known as Operation Little Saturn was hatched by Soviet General Malinovsky and his 2nd Guards Army.

When it was clear that the Germans were embarking upon Operation Winter Storm (see boxout on page 113), what started as Operation Saturn was downsized to Operation Little Saturn. Launched on 16 December, this was an attempt to punch through the Axis armies on the Don River and take Rostov, with the aim of thwarting German efforts to retrieve their troops from encirclement in icy Stalingrad. This Red Army operation on



*A group of Romanian or Hungarian soldiers in Russia in 1943*



## “OPERATION URANUS HAD PUNCHED A MASSIVE HOLE IN THE GERMAN FRONT IN SOUTHERN RUSSIA, PROVIDING PLENTY OF ROOM FOR THE SOVIETS TO MANOEUVRE”

the Eastern Front led to ferocious battles in the Northern Caucasus and Donets Basin regions of the Soviet Union between December 1942 and February 1943.

Operation Uranus had not only isolated the 6th Army in Stalingrad, but it had punched a massive hole in the German front in southern Russia, providing plenty room for the Soviets to manoeuvre. Operation Little Saturn was opportunistic thinking on the part of the Soviets, who knew that exploiting and increasing the success of Operation Uranus would be possible during the harsh Russian winter, in which the Germans would have struggled anyway. Thus, a winter campaign could be the best way to hit the Axis armies while they were weak and operating in a wholly unfamiliar terrain.

There were two stages to Operation Little Saturn. First, in December 1942, the Soviets attempted to cut off the German Army Group A in the Caucasus, though the German launch of Operation Winter Storm disrupted their plans considerably. The Soviets began a pincer movement to cut off the relieving forces. The 1st and 3rd Guards armies attacked from the north, encircling the Italian 8th Army, while to the south the 28th Army set their sights on the 1st Panzer Army. At the same time, the 24th Tank Corps reached the closest airbase to Stalingrad, Tatskinskaya. This was where the Luftwaffe was coordinating its attempt to supply the troops

under siege. Encountering dismal weather, the 24th Tank Corps were in luck, roaming the airfield at leisure, destroying German planes one by one.

The Soviets could have trapped huge numbers of Axis forces in the Caucasus, but under Operation Winter Storm the Axis had set up a mobile defence. Small, makeshift units were told to hold towns until support could arrive. Without orders or direction, officers in the region took initiative to support this rescue mission, rounding up men into makeshift fighting units that could keep hold of this tactical ground in southern Russia. A natural defensive line began to take shape to enact Manstein's plan in terrifying conditions. Food was so scarce that the Wehrmacht's horses were slaughtered for their meat, and supplies were slow as ever in arriving. The armies advanced, but it was questionable as to whether they would reach Stalingrad.

They managed to resist fairly well; the Italians were even outnumbered nine to one at times but managed to hold out for two weeks until 19 December, when they were ordered to withdraw, exposing the entire left wing to potential encirclement. In fact, the Soviets never even got close to Rostov. However, the Axis suffered such significant losses (just 45,000 of 130,000 Italians met by the Soviets in the first stage survived) that hope of the Germans reinforcing or rescuing the 6th Army, who were trapped inside and around Stalingrad, were destroyed. There was no choice but to leave them to their fates and for Manstein to

## OPERATION WINTER STORM

### The failed attempt to save the 6th Army

Operation Wintergewitter, or Winter Storm, lasting from 12–23 December 1942, was a German attempt led by Field Marshal Eric von Manstein and the 4th Panzer Army to relieve the trapped 6th Army from the south after the Soviets had unleashed Operation Uranus.

The Soviets had trapped them in Stalingrad just as winter was setting in. The Volga froze solid, meaning that the Soviets could supply their forces more easily by transporting resources across the ice. The ill-equipped Germans, unfamiliar with surviving Russian conditions, began to die in droves, succumbing to frostbite, malnutrition and disease.

The 6th Army, imprisoned in the city and believing that reinforcements were on their way, had been ordered not to break out and to hold fast. Even if they had decided to disobey orders, as some had wished to do, they could not have succeeded; they had neither sufficient fuel for a motorised breakout nor the know-how or resources to make it through the winter conditions on foot.

The Luftwaffe had begun to attempt to supply those trapped via an air bridge, delivering them food and equipment. However, it was quickly clear that the Luftwaffe's attempts would not be sufficient: in the first five days they delivered only ten per cent of the army's minimum daily requirements. The most they ever achieved was 50 per cent.

Moreover, Manstein desperately needed more forces to supplement his line of defence in order to restore his front between Group B to the north and Group A to the south. The only solution, in Manstein's eyes, was to coordinate an immediate breakout of troops from Stalingrad. He began a relief effort: Panzer Corps would strike northeast across the steppe towards Stalingrad, and others would strike from the Don River. However, this plan was unsuccessful due to the stresses exerted by Little Saturn.

Manstein's last option was a breakout with two phases. Phase one, Winter Storm, would see the 6th Army break out and link up with the Panzer Corps, maintaining the Stalingrad front. Phase two would be Thunderclap, a phased withdrawal from Stalingrad. Manstein knew Hitler would not agree to Thunderclap unless it was made absolutely necessary by the success of Winter Storm.

Initiating Winter Storm could have been possible within four days, but Hitler still refused to agree to troops breaking out of Stalingrad, and Manstein could not disobey him. Besides, there had not been enough fuel anyway.

Ultimately, Operation Little Saturn, combined with a failure to act, doomed Winter Storm from the beginning. The besieged 6th Army was left to its fate. Of the 250,000 Germans held under siege, only 90,000 survived, and these men were taken prisoner and subjected to horrific conditions. In the end, only 5,000 of those originally encircled made it back to Germany.



## “FOOD WAS SO SCARCE THAT THE WEHRMACHT’S HORSES WERE SLAUGHTERED FOR THEIR MEAT, AND SUPPLIES WERE SLOW AS EVER IN ARRIVING”

retreat, for he could neither revive his armies nor rely on the airlift to deliver supplies to the besieged 6th Army. Manstein was running out of options as Operation Little Saturn was decimating hopes of achieving the aims of Winter Storm.

The second stage of Operation Little Saturn began on 23 January 1943 with four armies of General Golikov’s Voronezh Front encircling and quickly destroying the Hungarian 2nd Army near Svoboda on the Don River. As a result of the attack, the Hungarian 2nd Army no longer represented a meaningful fighting force and ceased to offer any real resistance. As well as the Hungarians, the second stage also saw the Italian Alpini Corps encircled within three days, much like the German 6th Army in Stalingrad, forcing them to retreat. By February, some of the Alpini reached Kharkov and helped to form a weak line of defence that was devastated almost immediately. By 5 February,

after almost wiping out the German 2nd Army, the armies of the Voronezh Front approached Kursk and Kharkov.

Operation Little Saturn was therefore seen as a triumph in many ways for the Soviets: they succeeded in crushing Germany’s Italian and Hungarian allies and pushed the Germans to their limits. Nevertheless, Operation Little Saturn was taxing for both sides. The Soviets also became severely depleted and overstretched as a result, setting themselves up for a challenge during the German offensives of the Third Battle of Kharkov.

Operation Little Saturn, as part of both the larger Battle of Stalingrad and the Soviet-German War of 1941–1945, is often an overlooked part of WWII, despite being a key episode in the struggle between the two powers. This epic contest was fought in extreme climates and inhospitable, almost uninhabitable terrains. It is hard to get

a complete picture of the significance of these battles on the Eastern Front to the larger global war, given that Western historians naturally prioritise those that took place in Central and Western Europe.

Moreover, we have mainly German accounts to gain our understandings from, rather than a totally balanced perspective. The Cold War further increased distrust of Soviet sources in future years, and few Western historians spoke enough Russian to really grasp what there was to learn. And yet, the weakening of both the Axis and Soviet forces during this period had huge consequences for the outcome of WWII. Operation Barbarossa is often one of the only phases on the Eastern Front that has remained in the public consciousness, but we ought not to forget that Operation Little Saturn drastically weakened an already struggling Axis force during the merciless winter of 1942/1943.



A column of Soviet tanks during Operation Little Saturn, December 1942



*A wounded German soldier is transported away from the front line*





# THE INVISIBLE ENEMY

WORDS: CALLUM MCKELVIE

Determined to play their part in the defence of their homeland, thousands of guerilla fighters sowed chaos behind German lines

**O**n 3 July 1941, shortly after the Nazi invasion began, a grave Joseph Stalin addressed his people. He spoke of how, in the event of a Red Army retreat, partisan groups must be formed. The Soviet leader described how they should blow up bridges, destroy telephone lines and set fires. Finally, he stated, "In occupied regions conditions must be made unbearable for the enemy and all his accomplices. They must be hounded and annihilated at every step, and all their measures frustrated." By the end of the war, the German Army would come to fear the wrath of the partisans.

Command of the partisans would be the source of political dispute as various individuals within Moscow sought control. This hindered their effectiveness until the summer of 1942, when the Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement was established. Initially, partisan groups were formed by Red Army soldiers left behind in occupied territories. One of these units, led by Mihay Filipovich Shmyrev, scored an early victory when, according to Warfare History Network, they massacred up to 30 German soldiers bathing in a river. A number of groups, such as the Bielski partisans, were comprised of Jews who had escaped persecution, and they worked closely with Soviet fighters. Once organised, the partisan's sought to disrupt the German invasion in any way possible. This included relaying information about the movements of enemy forces, keeping them occupied by inducing them to conduct anti-partisan operations, and finally sabotage. During night raids they attacked ammunition dumps, communications lines and took out vital supplies. These nighttime acts of destruction proved to be exceedingly effective. David Stahel, in his book *The Battle for Moscow*, writes of a German soldier describing a fire "lighting up an entire region", the centre of which was a warehouse housing 90 German vehicles.

Partisans were often able to obtain the necessary weapons and equipment from Red Army troops at the front, or if possible they would capture supplies from the invading forces. There were even stories of the 11th Kalinin Partisan Brigade having acquired tanks. However, they were also known to steal from the innocent. In her book *Defiance*, Nechama Tec



quoted one partisan, who stated, "A partisan was something between a hero and a robber. We had to live and we had to deprive the peasants of their meagre belongings."

The Germans showed partisans no mercy, as the treatment of 18-year-old fighter Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya shows. After attempting to burn down a house and a number of stables that were thought to hold German cavalry horses, she was arrested, beaten, tortured and then executed on 29 November 1941.

German troops also carried out mass reprisals against partisan activities, targeting innocent civilians. According to historian Alexander Hill, in December of 1941, as revenge for the death of seven soldiers and an officer, an entire community was razed to the ground and the male population aged 16–50 shot.

By 1942, the Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement established regional commanders who combined smaller local groups to form proficient fighting forces. By the summer





*Partisan fighters came from all walks of life. Red Army troops needed to train partisan fighters in how to use weapons*



*Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, the 18-year-old partisan who was executed at the hands of the Germans*



*Partisan's had to obtain food where possible. Here one milks a cow seized from behind the German lines*

of that year, the Soviet Union estimated that an impressive 142,000 partisans were active in the occupied territories, almost double the 70,000 fighters previously reported that spring.

On 18 August 1942, the effectiveness of the partisans was demonstrated when Adolf Hitler issued Führer Directive No.46, in which he stated, "The bandit monstrosity in the East has assumed a no longer tolerable scope and threatens to become a serious danger to front supply and exploitation of the land." Whether consciously

or not, the Third Reich's dictator had openly conceded that the continuous harassment by Soviet partisans was seriously impeding the German invasion.

By the summer of 1943 the partisans were organised enough to launch arguably their most ambitious operation yet. Codenamed Rails War, the plan was said to have involved some 96,000 partisans. The mission was to blow up a colossal 200,000 to 300,000 sections of railroad, disrupting German use of the Belorussian and central Russian

rail system and helping to improve the Soviet Kursk counteroffensive's chance of success. Purportedly during the first night of the operation alone some 42,000 individual rails were destroyed, severely hampering the invaders.

Operation Rails War was a key moment in the partisan's battle to repel the invading German Army. As historian Kenneth Slepyan notes, the plan contributed to the fear that "the partisans were everywhere and that no place in the occupied territories was safe, especially at night".



## CITIZEN SOLDIERS

Taking cover in a ditch, these guerilla fighters (partisans) have managed to get their hands on a German machine gun. A constant menace to the Wehrmacht, partisans were extremely effective at sabotaging German supply and communication lines and harassing their infantry. German retribution was always merciless and disproportionate. Known as *Bandenbekämpfung* (bandit fighting), their reprisals often meant the slaughter of entire villages as revenge for the death of a single officer. Approximately 1 million people were killed as a result of Germany's anti-partisan methods in the East.







# KURSK: THE TIDE TURNS

WORDS: MARC DESANTIS

**In July 1943, Germany moved to encircle five Soviet armies and breathe new life into the invasion of the USSR**

**T**he Battle of Stalingrad had been a catastrophe for Nazi Germany. Its entrapped Sixth Army was destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers had either been killed or captured, and the Eastern Front had been ripped wide open. In early February 1943, it looked as if the Red Army stood poised to regain the whole of Ukraine as its soldiers surged headlong toward the Dnieper River, certain of imminent triumph.

It wasn't to be. In a brilliant campaign of manoeuvre beginning in late February that came to be known as the 'backhand blow', Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's Army Group South crushed huge Soviet forces that only weeks before had appeared unstoppable. With the arrival of the spring *rasputitsa* ('time without roads'), when the thaw turned Russia's many dirt roads into mud and sprawling grasslands into swampland, making movement extremely difficult, fighting on the Eastern Front came to a temporary halt.

By the end of winter 1943 an enormous salient roughly half the size of England thrust deep into German-occupied territory. The city of Kursk, a major rail junction about 500 miles to Moscow's south, lay midway at its base. Von Manstein observed that it "was just begging to be sliced off". He would warn, however, that attacks against it should be made sooner rather than later, before the Soviets could build up defensive forces.

But why attack at all on the Eastern Front? Wouldn't it be wiser to rest the German Army and allow it to restore its fighting strength, especially since it had been receiving numerous hammer blows since late 1942? Ultimately, the reason for attacking was political. Hitler wanted a victory of

some sort in the East in 1943 to bolster his allies, who were starting to doubt Germany's chances of victory. Also, Turkey would never be convinced to join Germany's side if the Third Reich were on the defensive. So there had to be an offensive, and the Kursk salient was the target chosen.

General Heinz Guderian, the German Army's inspector general of panzer troops, who strongly disfavoured the attack, would ask Hitler, "My Führer, why do you want to attack in the East at all this year?"

Contemplating the operation happened to be fraying Hitler's nerves. "You are quite right," he replied. "Whenever I think about this attack, my stomach turns over."

Nonetheless, operational planning proceeded. Hitler decided at first that the offensive against Kursk, *Unternehmen Zitadelle* (Operation Citadel), would be launched on 4 May. However, he chose to postpone its start until 12 June because he wanted more time for new tanks to take part. The start date was pushed back again a week later, on 13 May, when, with the collapse of the Axis position in Tunisia, Hitler decided to ready his forces in Italy for the expected Allied attack there. As it would turn out, Citadel would not commence until the first week of July.

The German attack on the salient would involve two army groups. The northern pincer was Army Group Centre under Field Marshal Günther von Kluge. The striking force itself, 9th Army under Colonel General Walter Model, comprised three panzer corps, two army corps and the Luftwaffe's Airfleet Six. In the southern sector, the attacking pincer, Army Group South under von Manstein consisted of Army Detachment Kempf, under General Werner Kempf, which included two army and one panzer corps; 4th Panzer Army, which contained two panzer corps and one army corps; and Airfleet Four of the Luftwaffe.

One part of 4th Panzer Army was the powerful 2nd SS Panzer Corps, which consisted of three very well-equipped and fanatical SS panzergrenadier divisions: 1st Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, 2nd Das Reich, and 3rd Totenkopf. 4th Panzer also contained 48th Panzer Corps, which itself contained another elite panzergrenadier division, *Grossdeutschland*, two further panzer divisions, and an infantry division, but these were all drawn from the regular army.

## **A robust Soviet reception**

The Soviets were well aware of the impending offensive thanks to their "Lucy" spy ring in

*Despite their powerful cannons, Germany's Ferdinand heavy-tank destroyers performed poorly at the Battle of Kursk*







*A Soviet T-34 tank rolls past a  
blazing house during the battle*



*Wehrmacht troops pour out of a  
trench while a machine gunner  
provides covering fire*



Switzerland, as well as from information derived from Britain's super-secret ULTRA decoding effort. This gave them ample time in which to prepare. Marshal Georgy Zhukov, Stalin's deputy supreme commander in chief, together with Marshal Aleksandr Vasilevsky, Chief of the General Staff, convinced Stalin to adopt a two-fold operational defensive strategy. First, the Soviets would absorb the German attack with their tank and infantry forces, fortifications and artillery and air assets. Then, once the Germans' offensive energy had been spent, they would launch their own counteroffensive and drive them back.

As part of the reception, Stavka, the Soviet Union's high command, deployed enormous Red Army formations called fronts (these were equivalent in size to Western army groups) on the northern and southern faces of the bulge. Voronezh Front, under General Nikolai Vatutin, on the southern edge of the bulge, comprised 1st Tank Army and four infantry armies. Air support was provided by 2nd Air Army. Central Front, on the northern face, commanded by General Konstantin Rokossovsky, was composed of 2nd Tank Army and five infantry armies. Attached also was 16th Air Army.

To the rear of the salient, the Stavka stationed Steppe Front, under General Ivan Konev, to act as a reserve in case of a German breakthrough. It consisted of 5th Guards Tank Army under General Pavel Rotmistrov and five infantry armies. Aerial

support was provided by 5th Air Army. Once the German offensive had been stopped, the plan was to use it for a counteroffensive against the Orel sector to the north.

The generous time granted to the Red Army in which to prepare also gave its soldiers confidence. "At the beginning of the war, everything was done in a hurry," observed one Russian tank commander, "and time was always lacking. Now we go calmly into action."

### Beasts of war

German tanks – the dreaded panzers – would provide the main mobile punch of the assault forces in the north and south. Hitler had put off the attack especially so that tanks such as the Tiger and the Panther could be deployed. The 56-ton Tiger heavy tank, sporting an extremely effective 88mm (3.5in) main gun, had thick armour, but it was also slow and prone to breakdowns. It was also rare, since it was complex and expensive to build. As for the brand-new 43-ton Panther medium tank, which sported a lethal 75mm (2.95in) gun, it was so new that it had not undergone proper testing to iron out mechanical problems.

The workhorse German tank was the Panzer IV, a medium vehicle with a powerful 75mm gun. Unlike the Tiger it was producible in large numbers, and unlike the Panther it was a battle-tested design. Numerous lighter, obsolescent Panzer III medium tanks were also present in some numbers.

One other German vehicle that bears mentioning is the Ferdinand heavy tank destroyer, also known as the Elephant. This 65-ton behemoth carried a giant 88mm cannon and was intended to take out Soviet tanks at long range.

Ninety units would serve with the German Army on the northern front. The primary opponent of the panzers was the Soviet T-34 medium tank. Although the heavy KV-1 tank was present in smaller numbers, as were lighter tanks, the T-34 was the mainstay Red Army machine in 1943. Armed with a good 76.2mm (3in) gun, it was rugged and well-armoured. While tanks would be extremely prominent in the fighting, they were not the only machines of war present on the battlefield. Luftwaffe Stuka dive bombers and Soviet Il-2 Sturmovik ground-attack warplanes rained down death from the skies, while cannon and rocket artillery rained down munitions on enemy ground forces.

If they were to secure victory the Germans would have to overcome a formidable array of defensive obstacles. Static Soviet defences presented the Germans with interlocking belts of minefields, anti-tank gun emplacements, trenches, ditches and assorted infantry positions to fight through. Hundreds of thousands of mines, both anti-personnel and anti-tank, had been laid. The Soviet idea was to channel the panzers into the killing zones of their waiting anti-tank guns, which were deployed in abundance. These weapons,

*Comprising almost 50 divisions, 900,000 Axis troops participated in Operation Citadel. They were supported by 2,700 tanks*





organised in groups of up to ten, were placed under the direction of just one overall commander. They would wait until a panzer lumbered into range and then all fire at a single target, thereby increasing the chances of knocking it out.

Against such dense Soviet defences, there would be no opportunity for the German panzers to manoeuvre, brute force now the weapon of choice. Citadel would be a bludgeoning attack on a vast fortress of minefields, barbed wire, trenches and gun pits.

Kursk would become legendary as the biggest tank battle ever fought, with thousands on each side participating in the combat. All told, 6,000 tanks, 4,000 aircraft and approximately 2 million men would enter the fray.

## Onslaught

Operation Citadel began on 5 July. Army Group South's assault struck Vatutin's Voronezh Front after both sides traded furious artillery barrages. 4th Panzer Army drove into Soviet lines but found it slow going through Soviet defences over the next several days, with their highly taxed engineers struggling to clear pathways through minefields. The Soviet defence strategy was working.

48th Panzer Corps was operating the new Panther tanks, of which much had been hoped. However, at Kursk they were mechanically troublesome and frequently broke down. The three panzergrenadier divisions of 2nd SS Panzer



Corps, Adolf Hitler, Das Reich, and Totenkopf, each equipped with a regiment of Tigers, engaged in fierce battles with Soviet tanks and made progress but were still well inside the defence zone days later. Army Detachment Kempf, also on the southern sector, was a strong force of three panzer divisions and six infantry divisions, but it was held up in vicious combat with Voronezh Front troops and was unable to keep pace with 2nd SS Panzer Corps to its west, therefore it could not protect the SS divisions' flank.

Elsewhere, on the northern sector, Model's 9th Army, a hugely powerful force, managed to grind its way southward across a 35-mile front against Central Front. But this advance was soon stopped at a strongly defended ridge near Olkhovatka, and Model's repeated attacks on 10 and 11 July could not crack Central Front's dogged defence.

Like the Panthers, the Ferdinand tank destroyers with 9th Army were disappointments. Though their high-velocity guns wreaked havoc on Soviet tanks, they had no integral machine guns for

*Soviet soldiers maintain fire despite artillery shells exploding around them*





## THE RED TIDE

self-protection. This left them vulnerable to Soviet infantry. General Guderian complained that these behemoths were forced to go “quail shooting” with their huge cannons against Soviet foot soldiers.

### Prokhorovka

In the southern sector, matters were reaching a climax. Fearing a German breakthrough by Army Group South, STAVKA had released 5th Guards Tank Army of Steppe Front from reserve and ordered it to move toward Prokhorovka. About the same time, the Waffen SS divisions of 2nd Panzer Corps were also driving there, and on 12 July the two forces met head-on.

Prokhorovka was not nearly the awesome battle of tanks as is typically understood. It isn't mentioned in contemporaneous German sources and only in a scant few Russian ones, indicating that its importance and scale were inflated. So why did it become so well-known for its gargantuan armoured ferocity? This myth is primarily attributable to 5th Guards Tank Army's commander, Pavel Rotmistrov. His frontal attack against SS panzers was disastrous for his command and so he exaggerated German losses to cover his own poor performance. He claimed 400 panzers of 2nd SS Panzer Corps were knocked out by his Fifth Guards Tank Army to make his own tremendous losses of around 300 armoured fighting vehicles and some 7,000 casualties seem acceptable.

Yet Prokhorovka was certainly a bitter, close-range tank engagement. Panzers and T-34s

*Armed with standard and anti-tank rifles, these Soviets take aim from a trench. The PTRD-41 was capable of piercing the armour of a Panzer III or IV*







*A row of Soviet tanks are illuminated by flares as they roll towards the German lines*

blasted each other from very short distances. This benefited the Soviets because the German advantage in long-range gunnery mattered little in such close combat. The fighting near Prokhorovka probably involved around 640 Soviet tanks and about 210 German machines. Thus, it was still a big slugging match, but not quite the epic battle recorded in the annals of the war in the East.

### **The bloody ledger**

Despite heavy losses suffered, von Manstein thought victory was in reach. His opinion mattered little, though, because back on 10 July the Western Allies had landed troops in Sicily. Hitler ordered the cancellation of Citadel on 13 July so that German forces could be moved west to shore up the position in Italy. Moreover, on 12 July the Soviets

had begun a counteroffensive (Operation Kutuzov) against the smaller Orel salient to the north of the Kursk bulge, and Army Group Centre had to reorient a significant portion of its forces to resist it.

The Battle of Kursk was over, with little of value having been achieved by the Germans. Guderian would rue its costliness. "The armoured formations, reformed and re-equipped with so much effort, had lost heavily both in men and equipment."

Indeed, while Soviet losses were gigantic, these could be replaced, while the Germans simply didn't possess the numbers to replenish their ranks as required. Further, Citadel was the first time during the war that a major German offensive had been blunted; the Soviets had finally prevented the enemy from puncturing their lines. This was largely due to the German decision to attack such heavily fortified positions but also improvements within the Red Army.

To Guderian, Kursk was "a decisive defeat". Afterward, "the enemy was in undisputed possession of the initiative". For von Manstein, the battle marked the time when the initiative had "finally passed to the Russians".

This irrevocable shift in strategic initiative on the Eastern Front was the lasting impact of the Battle of Kursk. Henceforth, the Red Army would be on the offensive, launching operation after operation to drive the Germans out of the Soviet Union and back inside the borders of the fatherland. They would not halt until Berlin had fallen. The fate of Hitler's 'thousand-year' Reich was sealed in Kursk.

**"CITADEL WAS THE FIRST TIME DURING THE WAR THAT A MAJOR GERMAN OFFENSIVE HAD BEEN BLUNTED"**



*"The faith of the German Army and the German people in the Nazi leadership and Germany's ability to withstand the growing might of the Soviet Union was irrevocably shattered [at Kursk]"*  
– Georgy Zhukov



# THE TRUTH BEHIND BARBAROSSA

Were Germany's dreams of conquering the East always doomed, or could Hitler's hordes have achieved a stunning victory in 1941? We asked historian, author and German military expert David Stahel for his views on the largest invasion in history



A senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales, Dr. David Stahel is a military historian and the author of several books on WWII, including 'Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East' and his latest work, 'Hitler's Panzer Generals'. His books are available to purchase online.



**Why, despite inflicting staggering losses on the Red Army in the early phases of the invasion, was Germany unable to deliver a knockout blow?**

The German plan foresaw large border battles to destroy the bulk of the Red Army, but that did not take account of either the echeloned Soviet defensive system or the scale and efficiency of Soviet force generation in the opening weeks and months of the war. The echeloned system was conceived as a succession of mobilisation zones only the first of which (12–62 miles in depth from the border) was exposed to the opening phase of Barbarossa. The second (62–248 miles in depth from the border) would present much greater problems for the panzer groups, especially as they

were operating alone at this depth as it took many weeks for the foot-marching German infantry to catch up.

The inability to destroy the Red Army in one swift operation gave the Soviets time to mobilise large numbers of reservists from their 14-million-man base. Already by the end of June 1941, some 5.3 million reservists had been called up, with further mobilisations following in succession. It is well known that the German panzer groups were destroying large Soviet formations in 1941, but it is less well known that the Soviets were raising armies faster than they could be destroyed. By the start of 1942 the Red Army was larger on paper than it had been on 22 June 1941. The quality of these new Soviet armies was typically poor, but the operational strength of the German panzer groups was badly depleted, so stalemate was inevitable.

**In the event that the Germans had seized Moscow, could the Soviet Union have continued to fight on?**

In the first instance, the prospect of the Germans seizing Moscow, which is too often portrayed as a knife-edge battle that saw the Soviets snatch a victory from the jaws of defeat, is very far from reality. The German Army did not reach the city, to say nothing of having the manpower and material reserves to seize it. Yet even if we assume they had, Soviet resistance would not likely have collapsed.

By December 1941 it was apparent to much of the Soviet population that Germany was waging a war of annihilation, not only against the Soviet

Government but against the Slavic peoples of the East. The Holocaust was mass murdering Soviet Jews, whole cities like Leningrad were being starved and brutal occupation methods robbed everyday people of the necessities of survival (food stocks, draft animals, winter clothing etc).

In that context, many people were fighting not simply for Stalin or Moscow's survival, but for themselves. The war quickly became a popular struggle for national liberation from a hated foreign oppressor.





**Do you think Japan would have breached its non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and launched its own invasion if the Germans had been successful in taking a major city such as Moscow or Stalingrad?**

Even assuming Moscow had fallen to the Germans before Pearl Harbour, the realities of invading the Soviet Union would have required Japan to start a parallel high-intensity war to their long-running conflict against China. Anglo-American sanctions against Japan were already endangering the Japanese war effort in China, so in spite of some support from fanatical elements within the Japanese Army, the Japanese navy had successfully argued that striking south to seize precious resources, especially oil, was the only option to finally ending the war with China. Even with the successful Japanese occupation of South East Asia, the war stalemated in China, making it foolhardy for the anyone in the Japanese Army or government to contemplate a major campaign against the Soviet Union.

Indeed, beyond the strategic realities, as early as 1938 and 1939 two brief wars had been waged between Japan and the Soviet Union, both of which resulted in Japanese defeats.

**Was Hitler's desire to take Stalingrad purely an obsession with a symbolic victory, or would an Axis triumph in the city have brought about major strategic benefits for Germany?**

We must remember that Stalingrad was never the objective of Operation Blue (the German summer offensive of 1942). It was mentioned just once in the German war directive and only in the context of flank defence for the main thrust into southern Russia. The strategic priority was unambiguously oil, along with a few other secondary resources, which were essential for Germany's future war effort. The campaign was never supposed to revolve around a single city and there was little to gain even by a supposed triumph. Stalingrad had value as a medium-sized industrial city as well as for its position on the Volga River, the possession of which would prevent the flow of important Soviet river traffic. Yet the city was no substitute



for the vital resources desperately required by the German war economy. Moreover, the costly urban fighting could not be sustained by Army Group B's already depleted units. As in 1941, Hitler was attempting far too much and compounded the problem by allowing the strategic focus of the offensive to become confused.

## **"THE WEHRMACHT'S FORCES WERE WOEFULLY UNDER-RESOURCED FOR THE SCALE OF THE UNDERTAKING"**

**Given the delay prior to the operation caused by the need to invade Yugoslavia and Greece, never mind the sheer scale of the operation, was it doomed to failure from the start? If not, when did Germany finally let any chance of victory slip away?**

The delay to Barbarossa was not a major factor in its failure. This is an older narrative that suggested that if only the Germans had had a few more weeks of good weather then the whole venture would have succeeded, which took no account of German operational problems and instead attributed decisive importance to the autumn weather and Russian mud. In fact, the Balkan campaign might not have been the decisive factor in Barbarossa's

timing owing to a late thaw in 1941, which kept rivers swollen and fields sodden until later into the year.

In truth, the Wehrmacht's forces were woefully under-resourced for the scale of the undertaking, and they suffered from very poor logistical support and misleading intelligence assessments, which meant the Germans fundamentally underestimated the Soviets. Complicating matters further, the German command failed to appreciate the geographic and environmental challenges of campaigning in the Soviet East as well as the political and social implications of their 'war of annihilation'. All of these factors were built into the German concept for war against the Soviet Union and probably did doom it to failure from the outset, but we can only see that unfolding by studying what took place in the summer of 1941.



## **Why did Operation Barbarossa fail? Should Hitler shoulder all of the blame?**

My last answer probably sums up the broad range of problems that undermined Barbarossa's strategic planning. Importantly, there was no single factor, but while we typically look at what the Germans did or did not do, we must remember that Soviet resolve and willingness to sacrifice played as much of a role as anything in denying Germany's success.

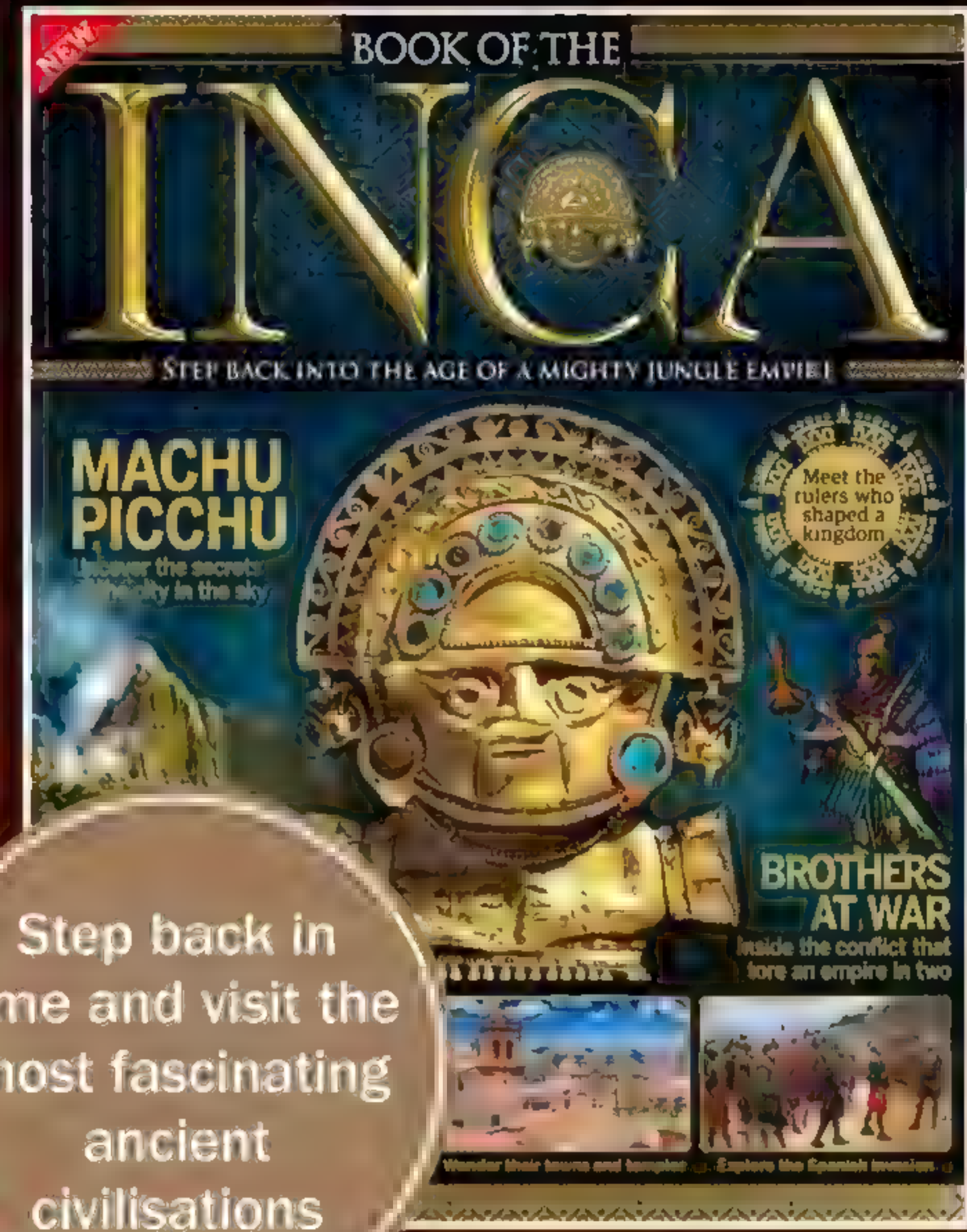
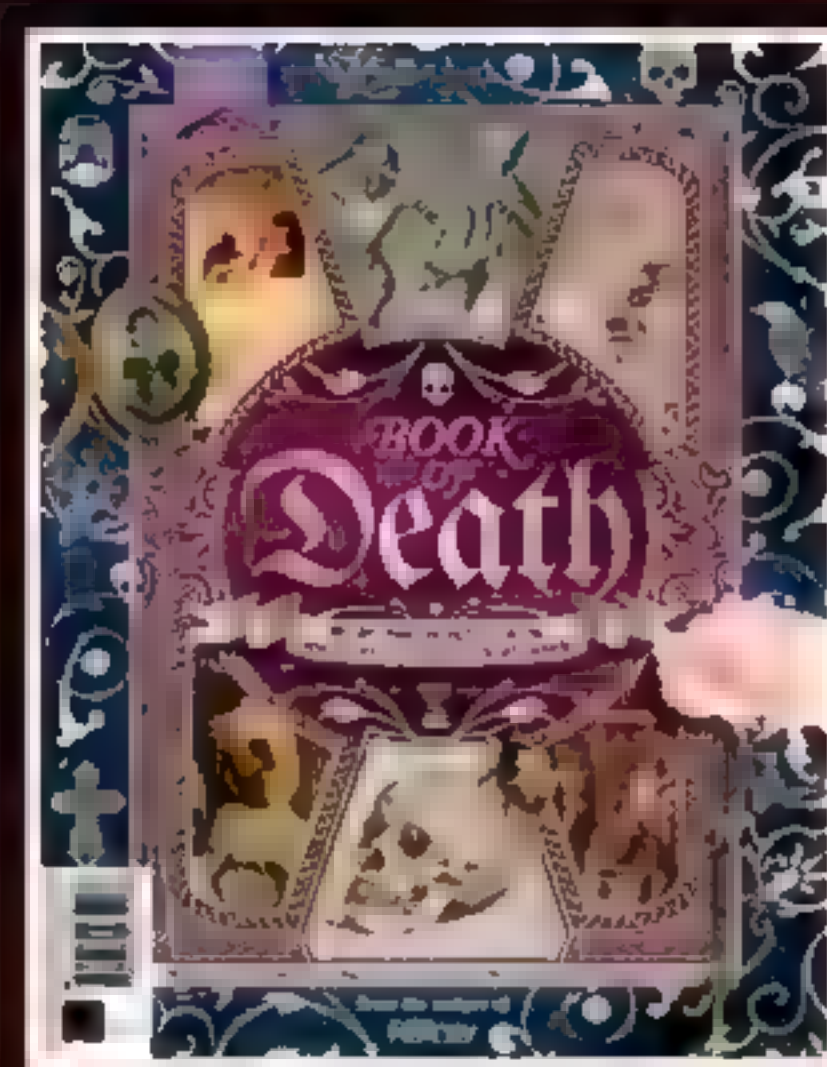
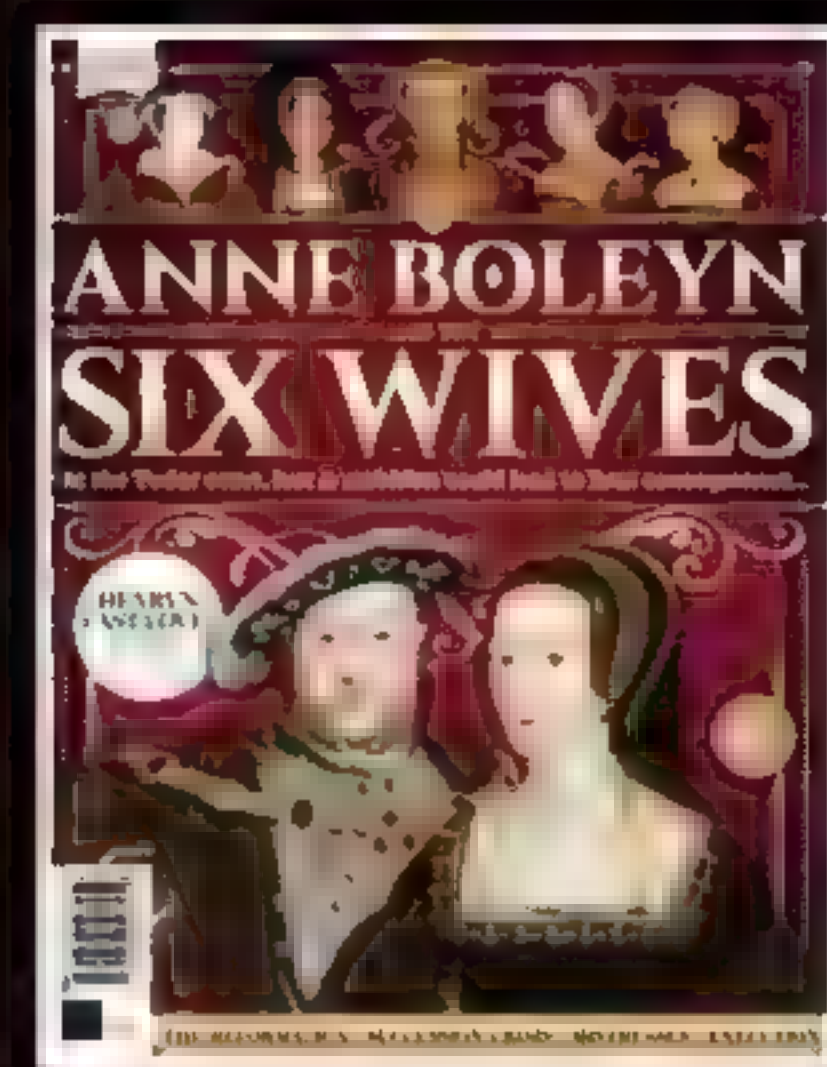
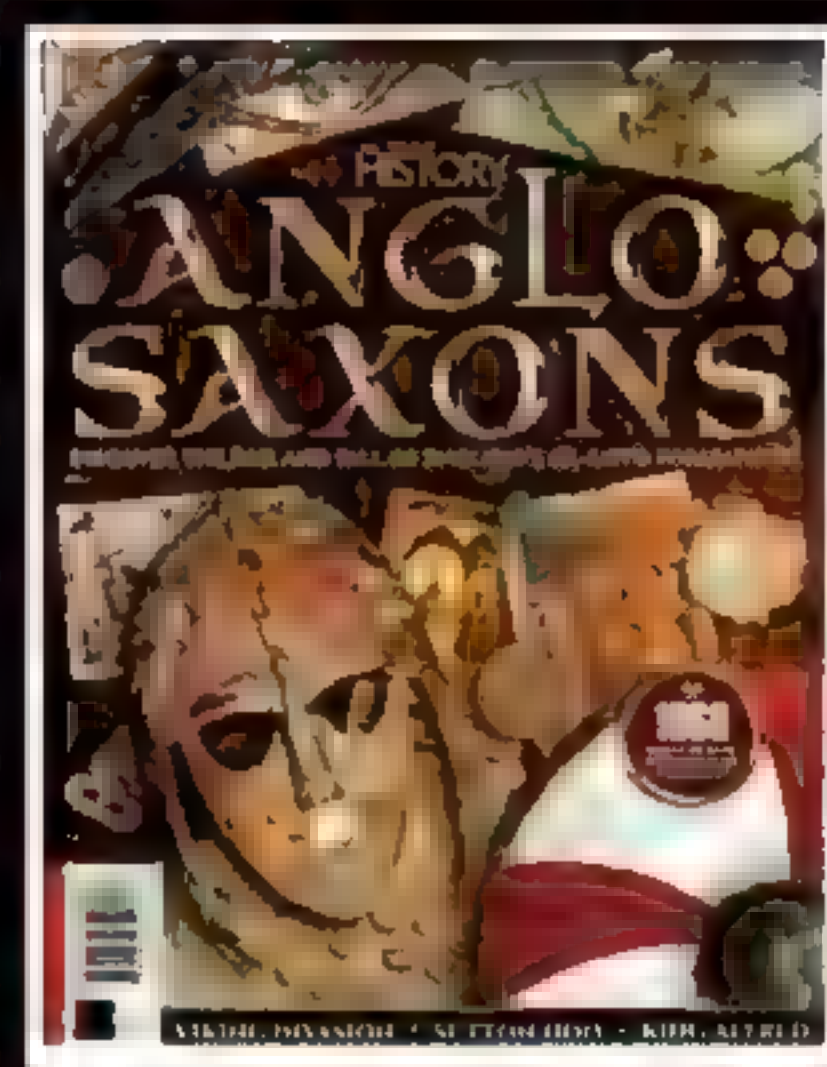
Hitler's central role is undeniable. It was his decision alone to invade the Soviet Union and he took a very active part in the military planning of the campaign, yet his strategic conception was shaped and encouraged by his closest advisors and senior generals. The German military command did not view the Red Army as a serious rival to the Wehrmacht and operational problems that were in fact revealed during the planning process were typically dismissed without much reflection or further attention. In spite of what German generals wrote after the war, there was no serious opposition to Hitler's decision to attack the USSR.



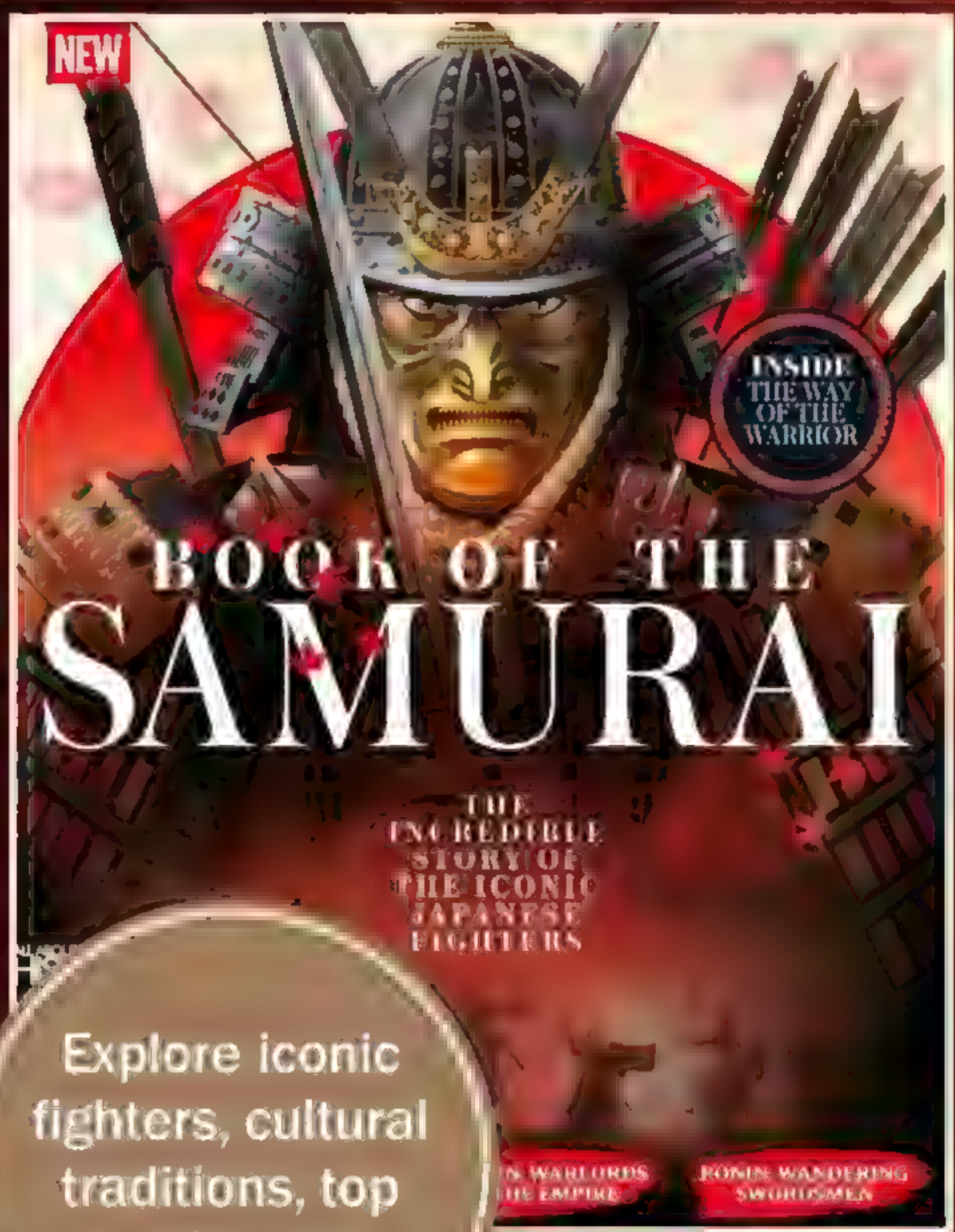
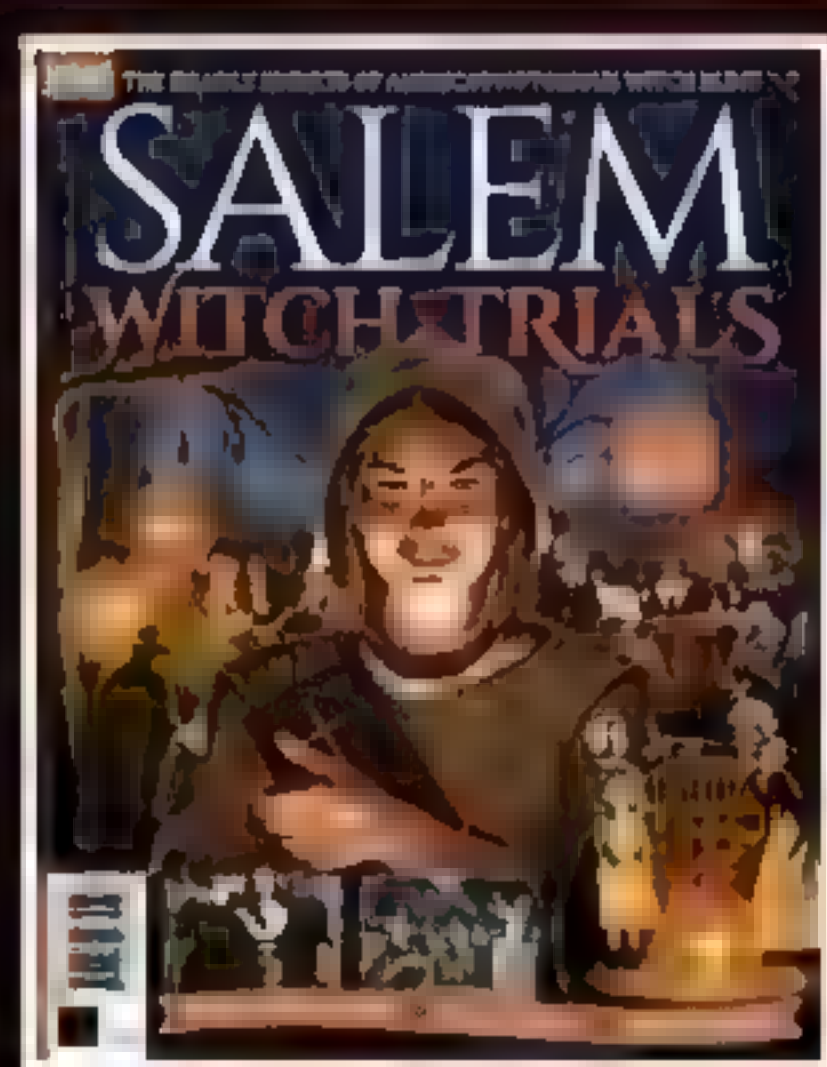
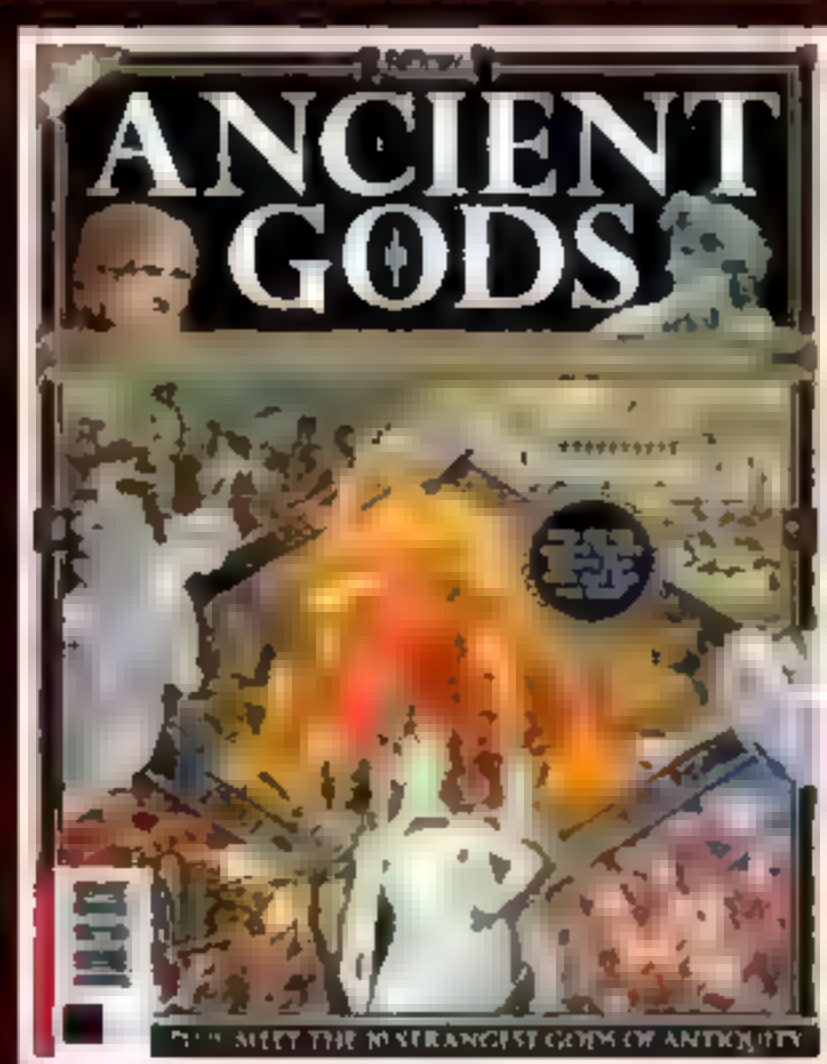
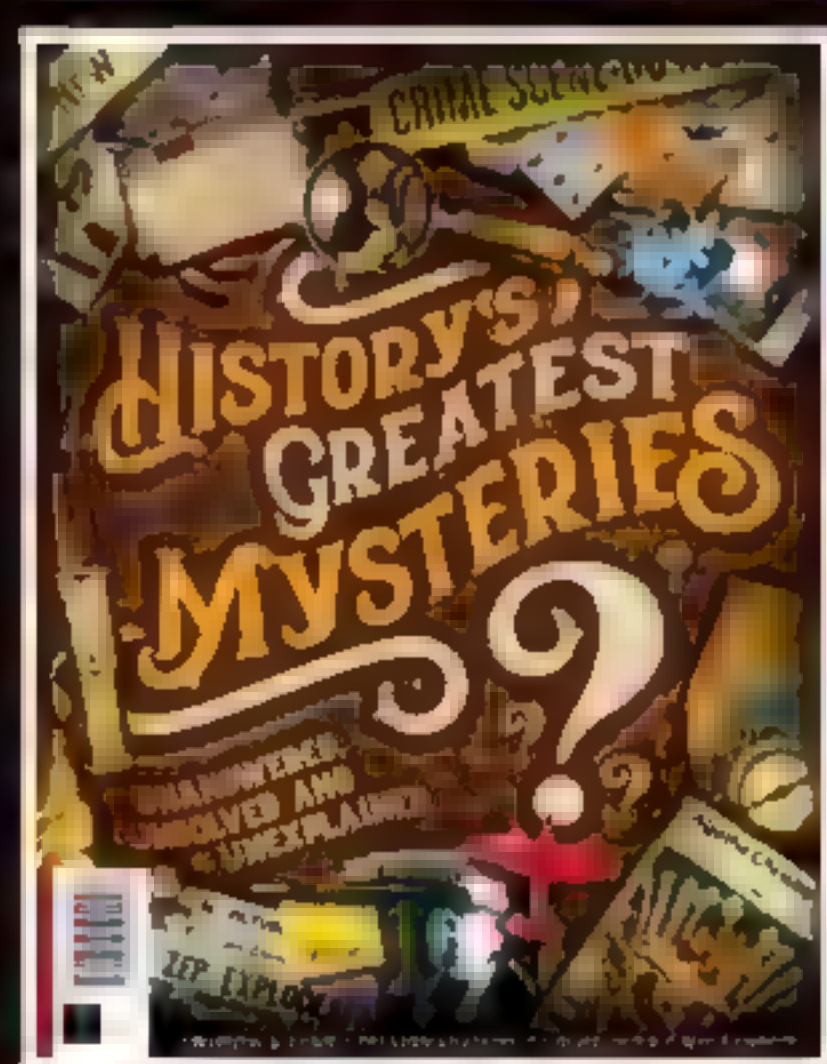




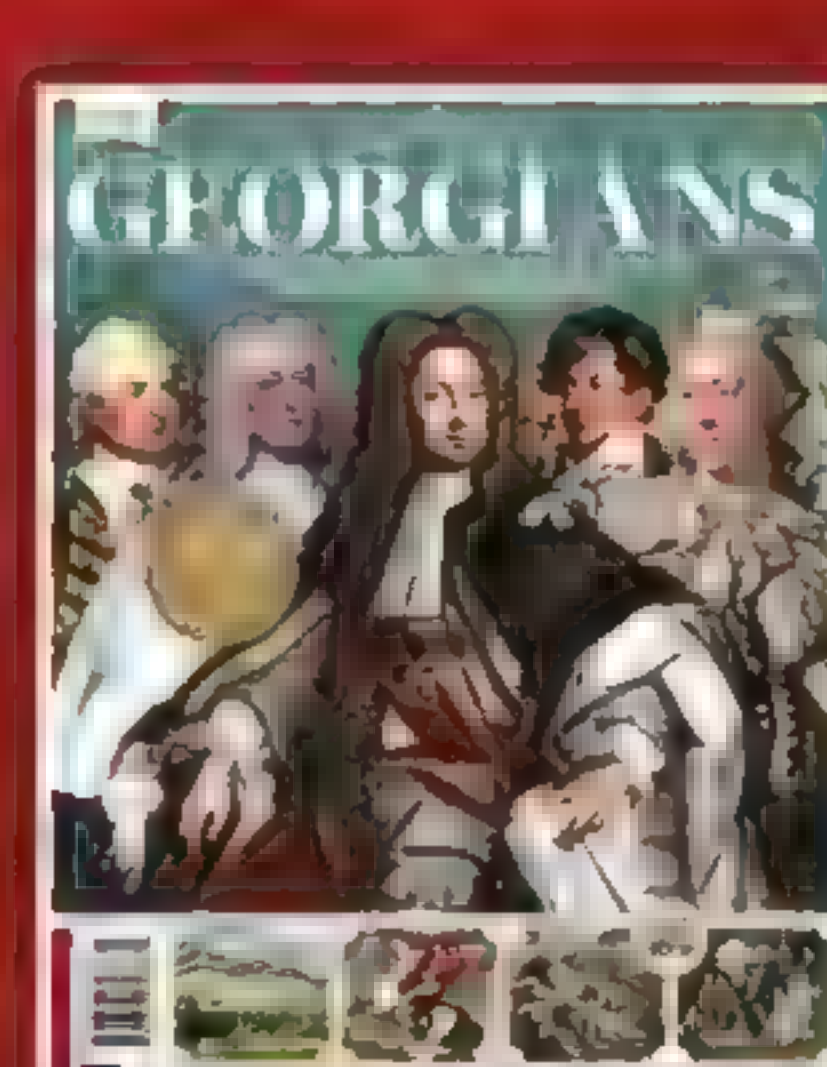
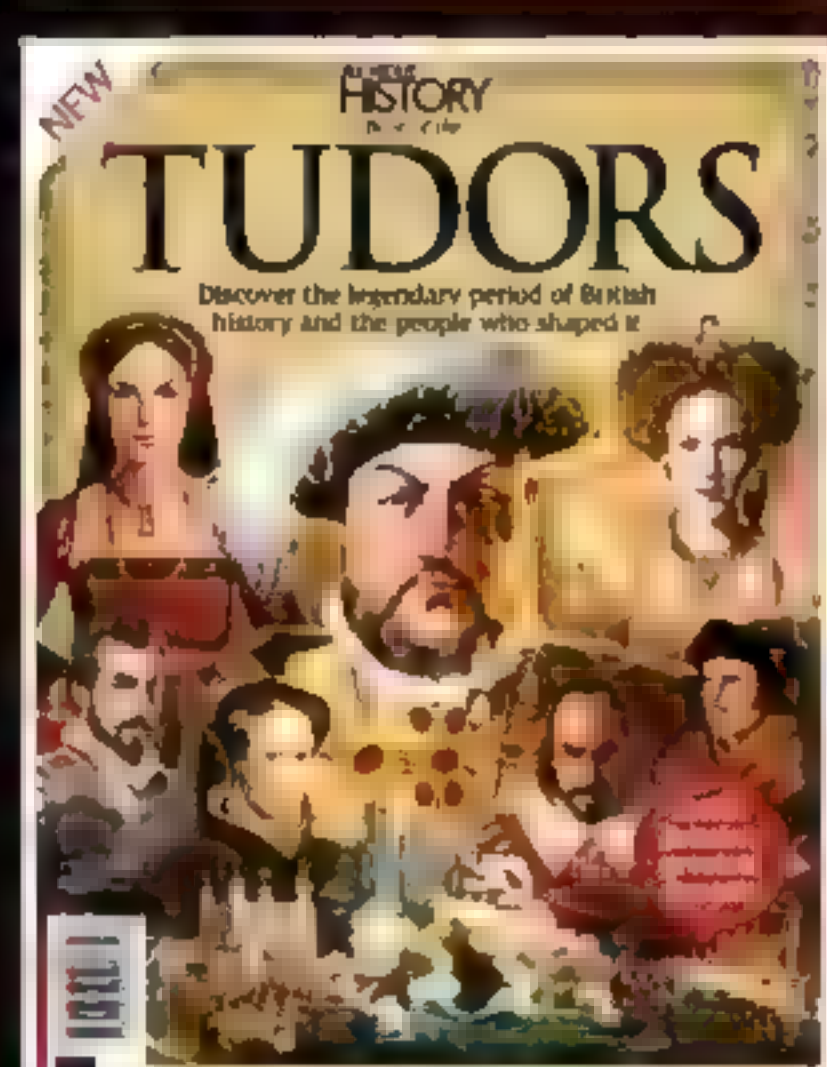
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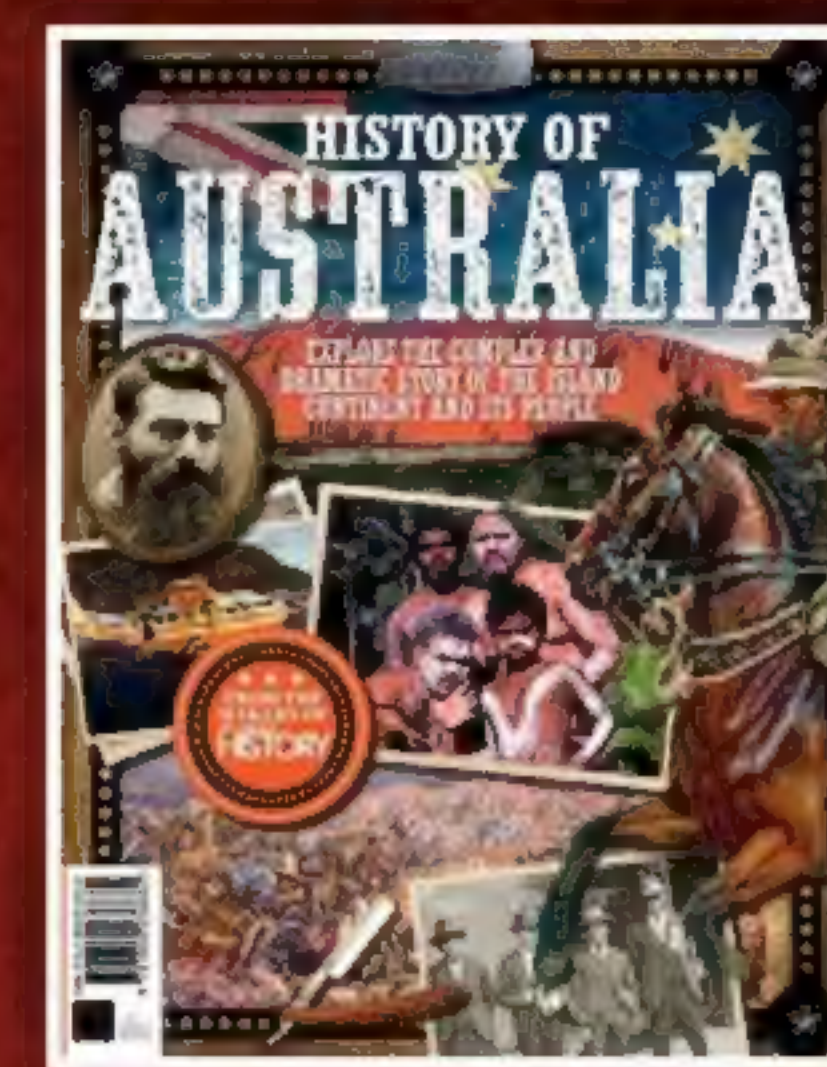
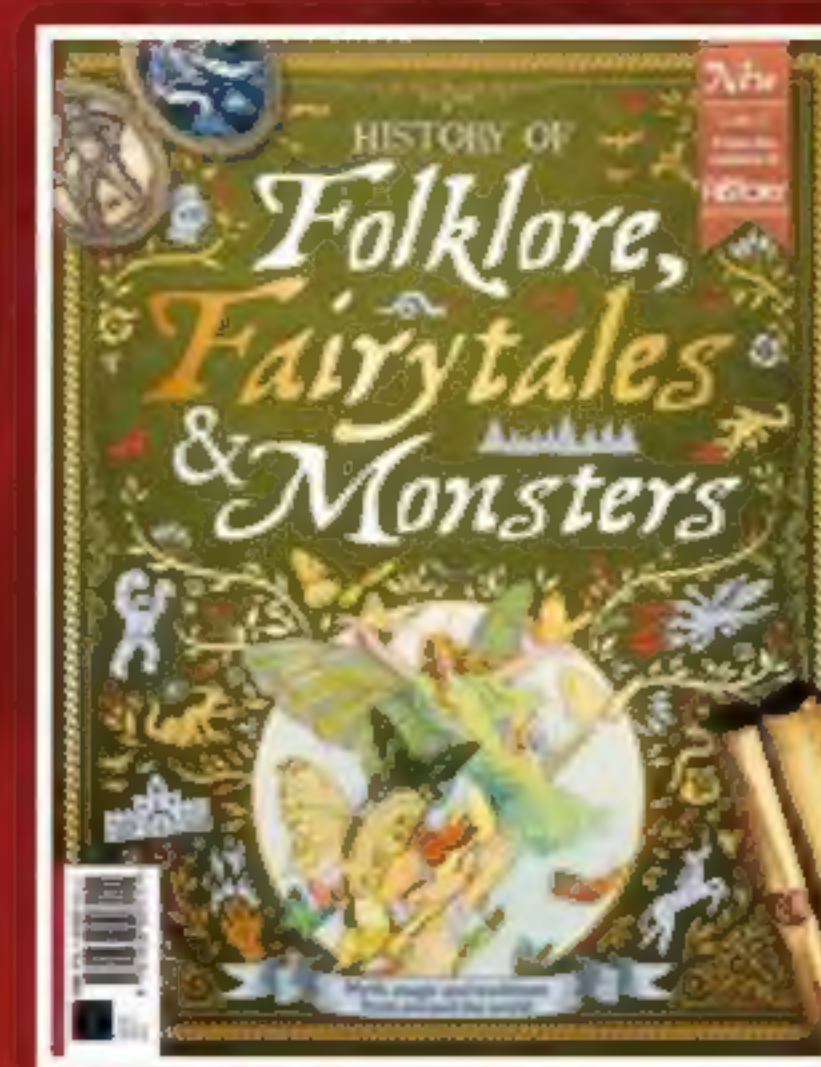
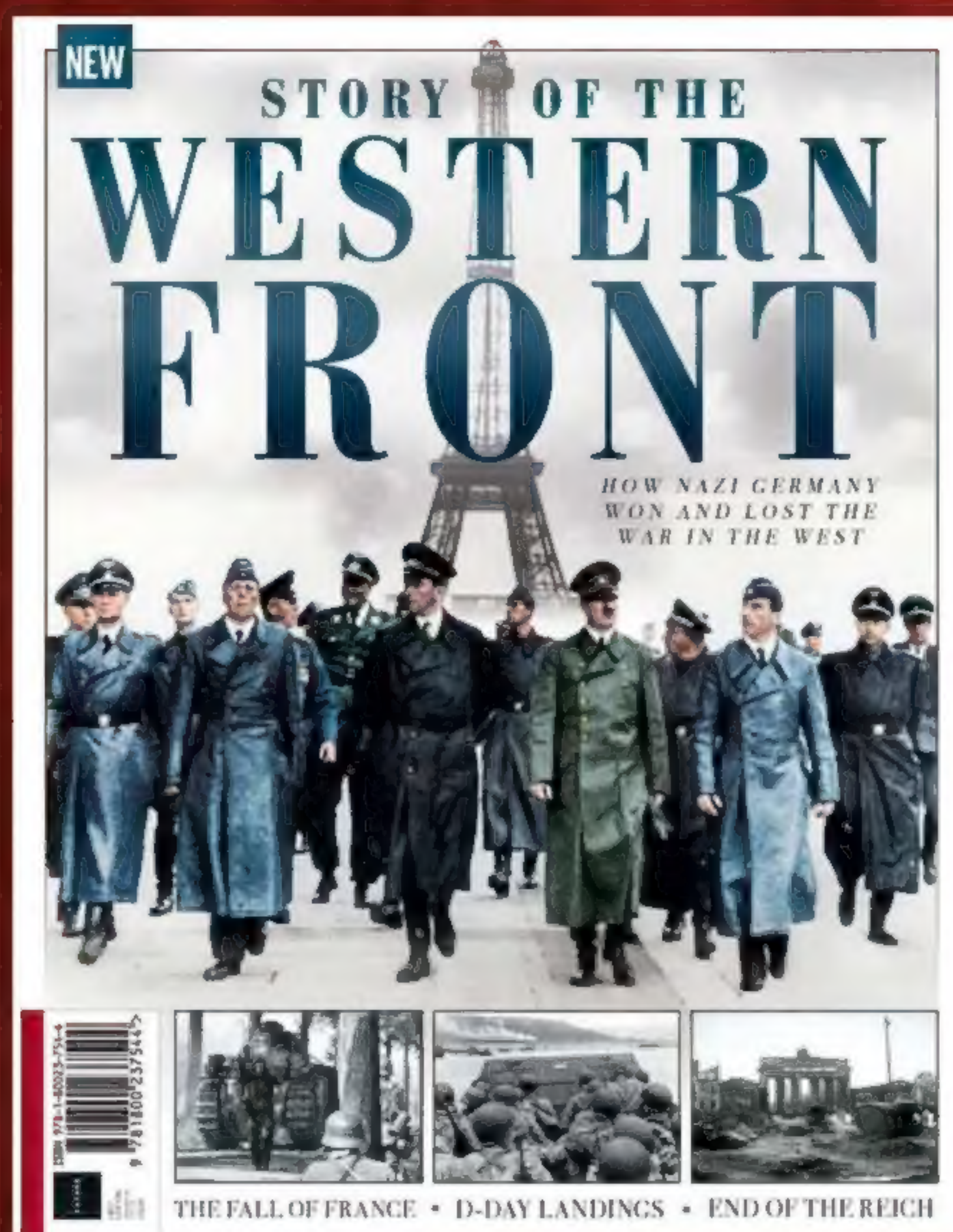
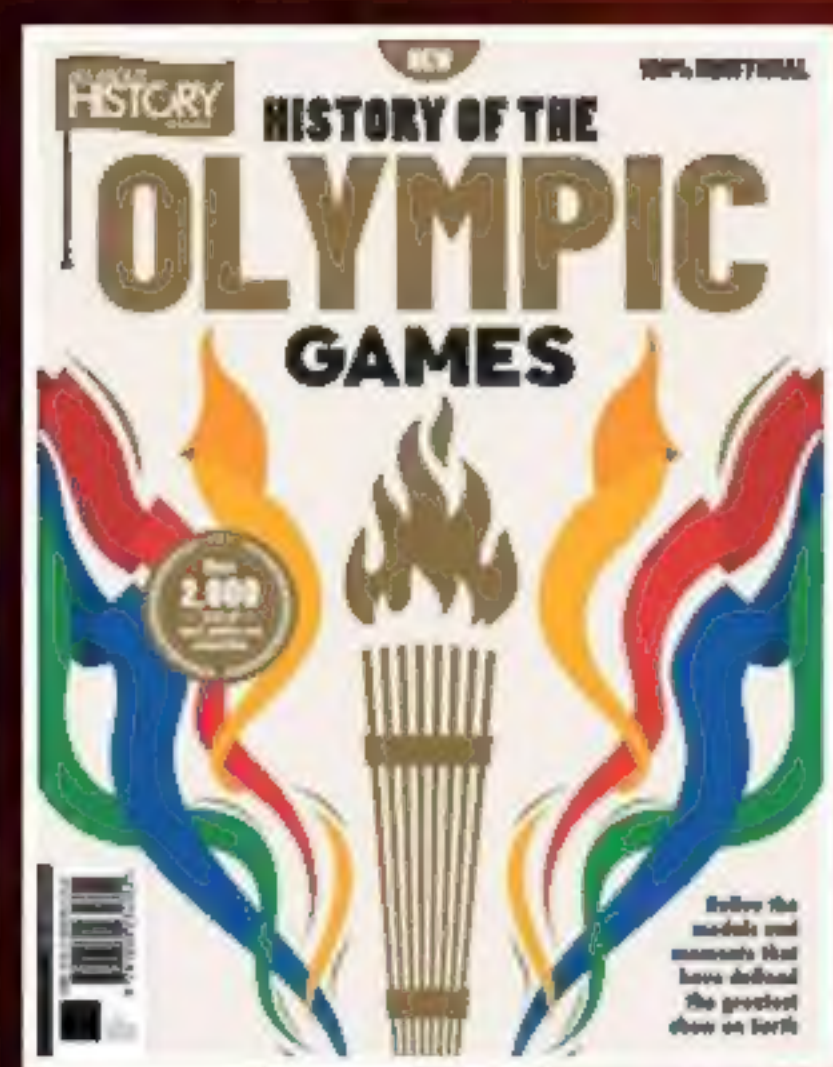


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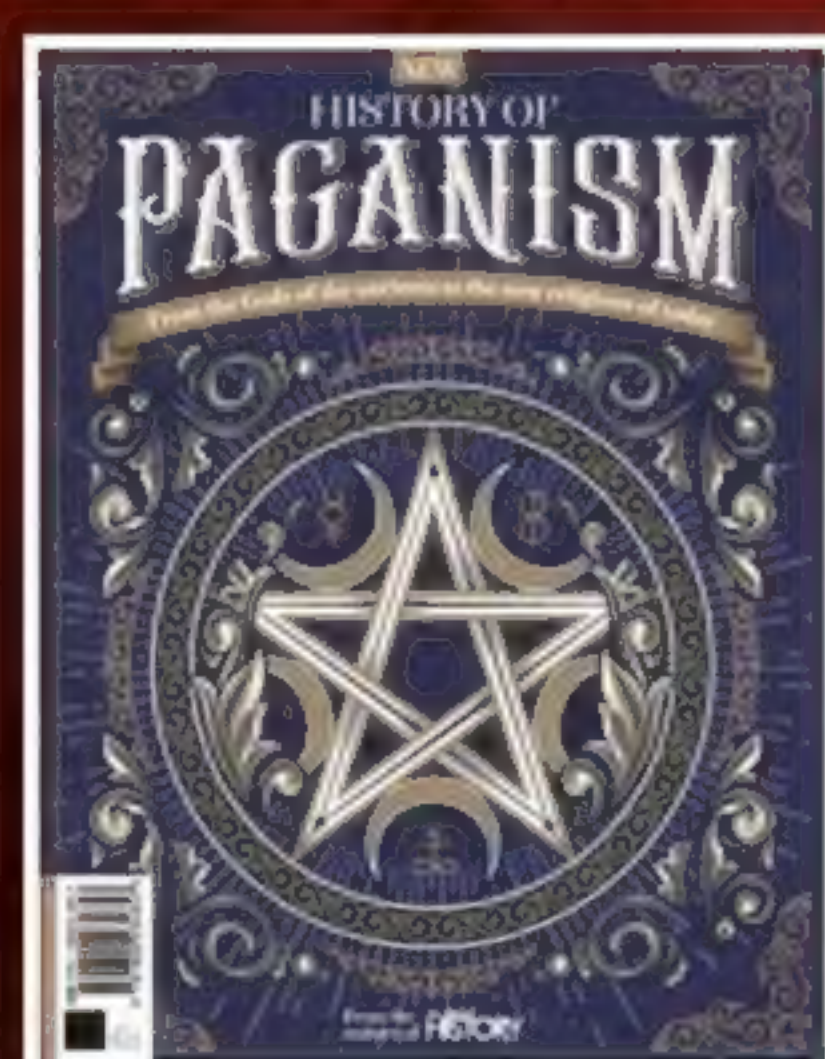
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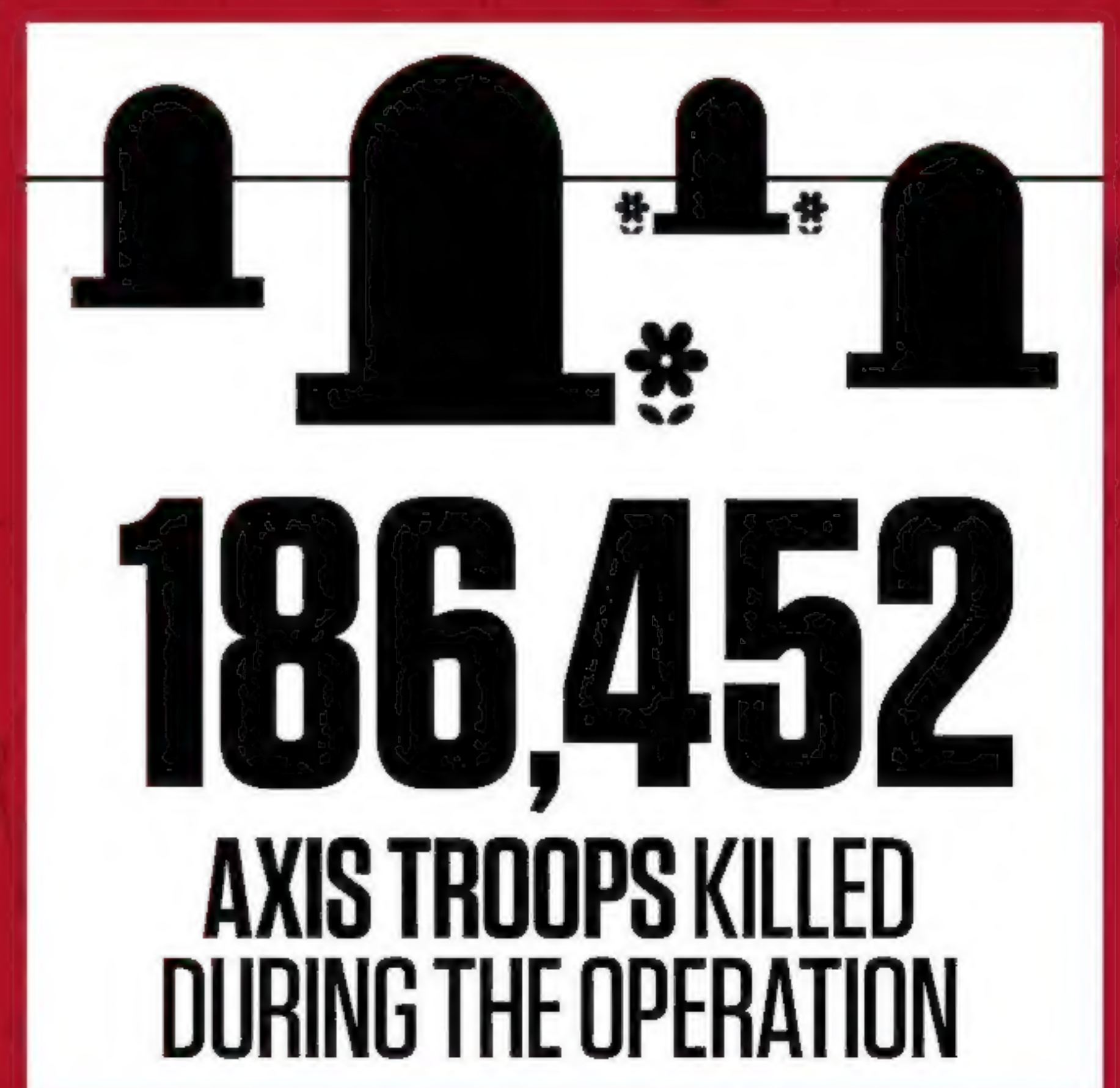
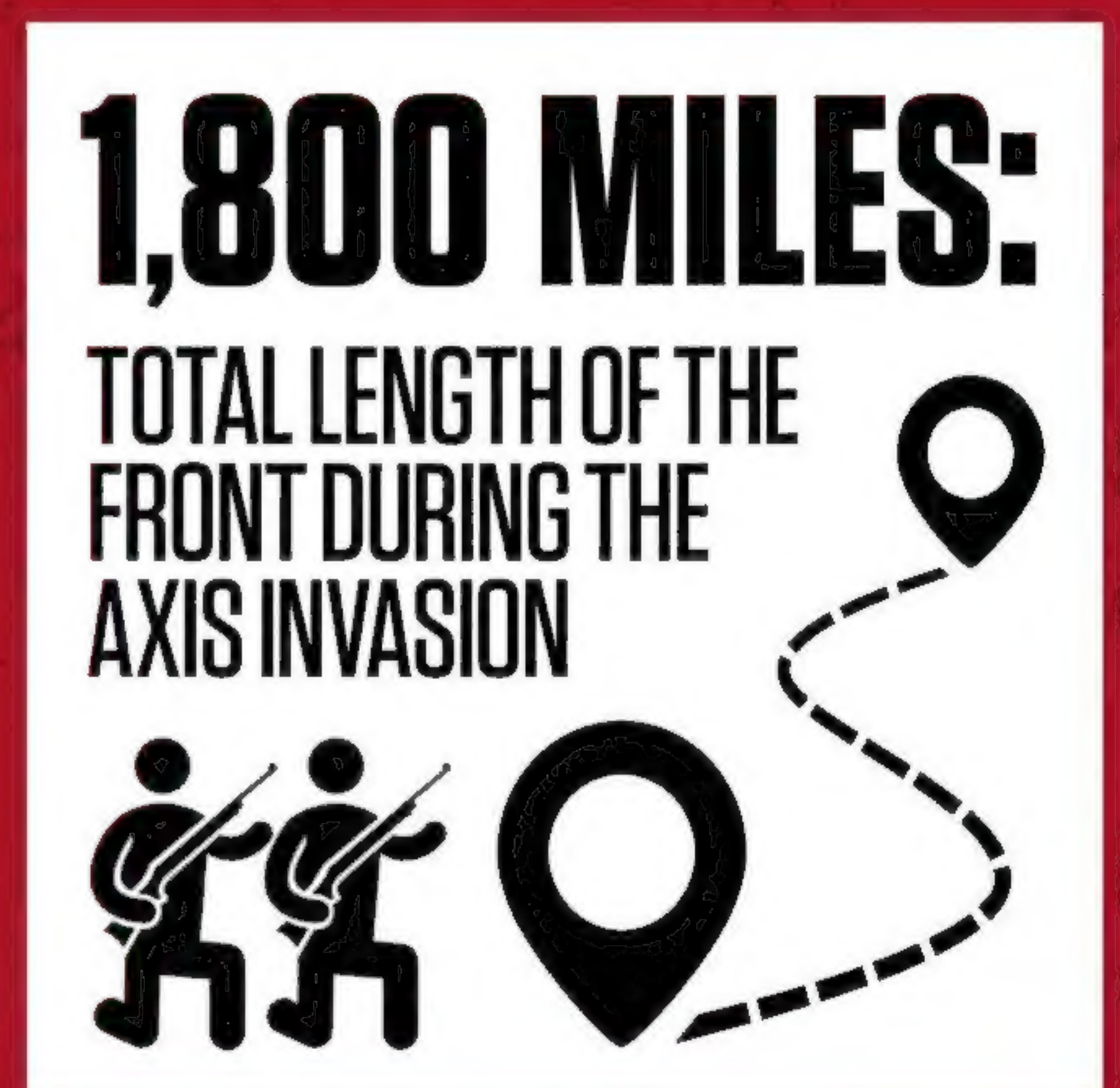
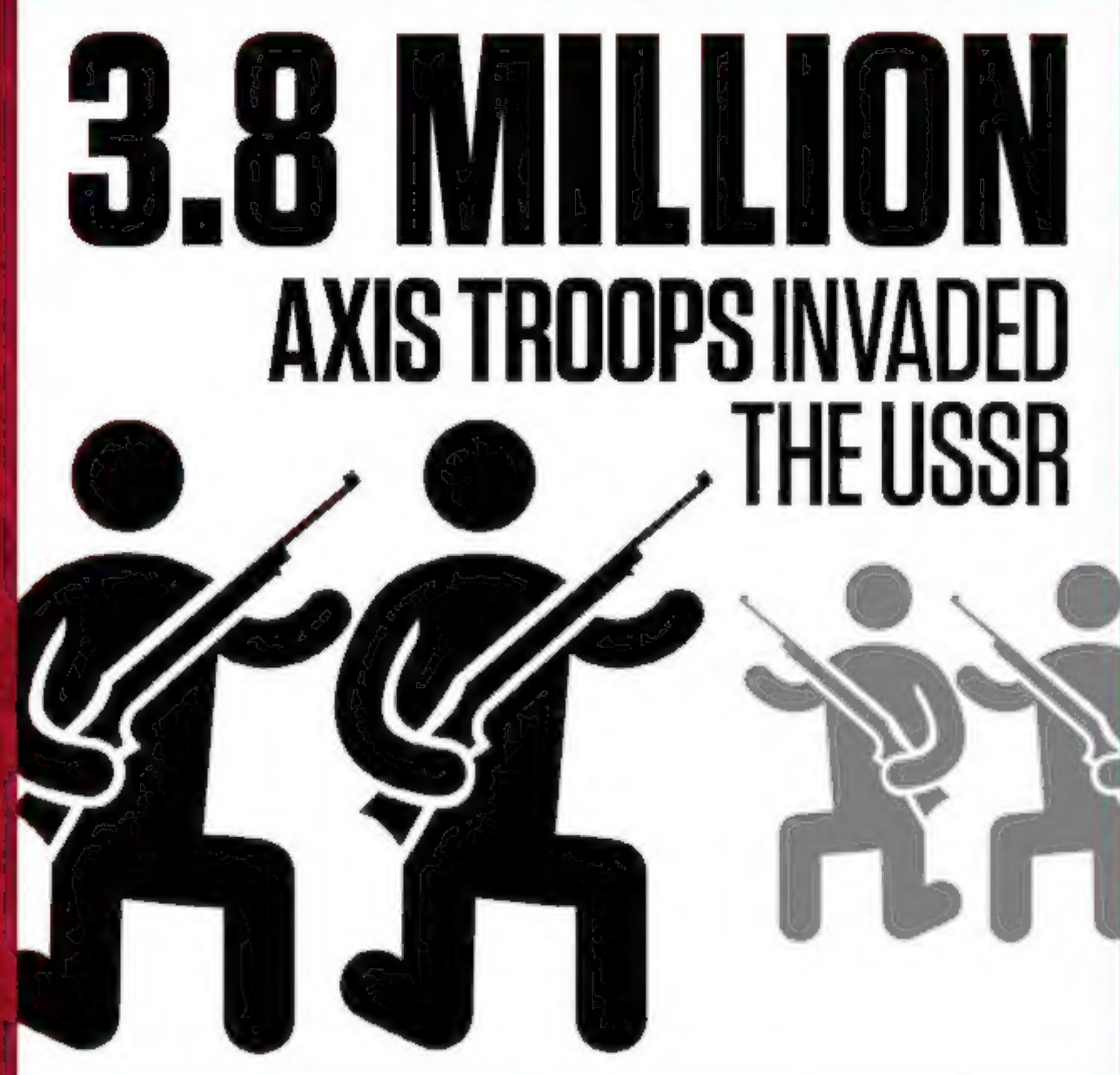


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